Nan Sherwood at Palm Beach

By Annie Roe Carr

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From Jennie.

The music carried them far away on golden wings of melody.
(*See page 190*)

NAN SHERWOOD
AT
PALM BEACH
OR
STRANGE ADVENTURES AMONG THE ORANGE GROVES

BY

ANNIE ROE CARR

Author of "Nan Sherwood at Pine Camp," "Nan Sherwood's Winter Holidays," "Nan Sherwood at Rose Ranch," etc.

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NEW YORK
GEORGE SULLY & COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

BOOKS FOR GIRLS

BY

ANNIE ROE CARR

THE NAN SHERWOOD SERIES

NAN SHERWOOD AT PINE CAMP
Or The Old Lumberman's Secret

NAN SHERWOOD AT LAKEVIEW HALL
Or The Mystery of the Haunted Boat-house

NAN SHERWOOD'S WINTER HOLIDAYS
Or Rescuing the Runaways

NAN SHERWOOD AT ROSE RANCH
Or The Old Mexican's Treasure

NAN SHERWOOD AT PALM BEACH
Or Strange Adventures Among the Orange Groves

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Nan Sherwood at Palm Beach

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NAN SHERWOOD AT PALM BEACH

CHAPTER I

THE CRASH ON THE HILL

"SMOOTH as glass!" ejaculated Nan Sherwood, as she came in sight of Pendragon Hill and noted the gleaming stretch of snow and ice that ran down to the very edge of Lake Huron.

"And you're the girl that said coasting time would never, *never* come," laughed her chum, Bess Harley, who was walking beside her with her hand on a rope attached to a bobsled that four girls were drawing.

"Never is a long word," admitted Nan. "I didn't quite mean that; but the weather's been so mild up to now that I was getting desperate."

"Nan registering desperation," put in Laura Polk, she of the red hair and irrepressible spirits.

Laura struck an attitude of mock desperation, but the effect was marred when her foot slipped and she went down with a thump.

Her laughing mates helped her to her feet and brushed the snow off her dress.

"The wicked stand on slippery places," quoted Grace Mason mischievously.

"Yes," Laura came back, as quick as a flash, "I see that they do, but I can't."

The shout of laughter that followed atoned somewhat for her loss of dignity—although she had not lost much, for Laura and dignity were hardly on speaking terms.

Laughing and chattering, all trying to talk at once and all succeeding, the bevy of light-hearted girls reached the top of the hill.

Before them stretched Lake Huron, extending farther than their eyes could see. For a long distance out from shore the lake seemed frozen solid. A small island rose above the ice about half a mile distant, and this was the limit fixed upon for the coasters. The cove between the foot of the hill and the island had a glassy coating of ice that had been swept and scraped and served for skating as well as coasting.

"I wonder if it's perfectly safe," remarked Grace Mason, a little timidly. "You know this is the first time the cove's been frozen this winter, and we haven't tried it yet."

"Bless your little heart, you'll be as safe as if you were on a battlefield," was the dubious comfort that Laura held out.

"Much safer than that," interposed Professor Krenner, the teacher of mathematics and architectural drawing at the Lakeview Hall school that the girls were attending. "You can be sure that neither Dr. Prescott nor I would take any chances on that score. A heavy logging team went over it yesterday, and the ice didn't even creak, let alone crack. And every day that passes of this kind of weather makes it thicker and stronger."

"My, but that's a comfort," remarked Laura. "I'd hate to have this young life of mine cut off just when it's so full of promise."

"How Laura hates herself," put in Bess Harley.

"You're perfectly safe, Laura," Nan assured her. "Only the good die young, you know."

The professor's kindly eyes twinkled as he looked from one to the other of the rosy-cheeked, sparkling-eyed girls, bubbling over with fun and vitality. He had just come up from the queer little cabin in which he lived at the edge of the lake. It was part of his work to supervise the coasting and, as far as possible, keep it free from accident.

About his sole diversion was playing on a key bugle, and the long-drawn-out notes of the instrument, sometimes lively and sometimes in a minor strain, were familiar sounds to the girls, and often an occasion of jesting.

Professor Krenner held the bugle in his hand now, and after glancing at his watch, he raised the in-

strument to his lips and blew a clear call that had the effect of hastening the steps of some of the groups that were coming toward the hill from the Hall, the roof of which could be seen over the tops of the trees.

Outdoor sports were made much of at Lakeview Hall, not only in the catalogue designed for the perusal of parents, but in actual fact. "A sound mind in a sound body" was Dr. Beulah Prescott's aim for her pupils, and exercise was as obligatory as lessons. None was excused without an adequate reason, and the group upon the hill grew in numbers until it seemed as though all the members of the school were present except the smaller girls, who had a slide of their own.

"All here except the queen," remarked Laura, as she looked around her.

"The queen?" repeated Bess Harley, staring at her.

"Queen Linda of Chicago," explained Laura, with a wicked twinkle in her eye.

"For goodness' sake, don't ever let Linda Riggs hear you say anything like that, Laura Polk," admonished Bess. "She's so conceited that she wouldn't know it was sarcasm. She'd think it was a tribute drawn from an unwilling admirer."

"I know," laughed Laura. "It doesn't take much to set her up. If she had water on the brain, she'd think she was the whole ocean."

"Here she comes now," remarked Nan, after the laughter caused by Laura's sally had subsided.

A tall girl, wearing expensive furs and having a supercilious air, came along with two or three companions. It was noticeable that she left to them the work of drawing the bobsled, while she sauntered along, ostentatiously adjusting her furs as though she sought to call attention to their quality.

"Hurry up, Linda," called out Laura. "I believe you'd be late at your own funeral."

"I never get anywhere early," snapped Linda. "It isn't good form. When I go to the theater I always get in late. I always have the best seat that money can buy reserved for me, so what's the use of hurrying? Of course it's different when one has to go early and scramble for a seat."

"That may be your habit in Chicago, but it isn't in favor here, Miss Riggs," said Professor Krenner dryly. "But now that all seem to be here, we'll start the races. You understand that all sleds are to keep three minutes apart so as to avoid accident. The course is straight out on the lake, and the best two out of three trials win the race. Miss Sherwood, since you are nearest the starting line, suppose you get your sled in position to lead off. Not so fast, Miss Riggs," he went on, as Linda tried to shove her sled to the crest of the hill. "I said Miss Sherwood was to go first."

"I don't see why I should have to wait," pouted

Linda, as she reluctantly drew back her sled before the decided look in the professor's eye. "Hateful old thing," she remarked in a low voice to her special friend and intimate, Cora Courtney. "He favors Sherwood because she attends his poky old lectures on architectural drawing and pretends she likes them."

"I shouldn't be surprised if that were just it," replied Cora, who made a habit of agreeing with the rich friend whose friendship often proved profitable to Cora. She had no money herself but clung closely to those who had.

"Who was it," asked Rhoda Hammond in an amused whisper of Nan, "who wrote an essay once on the 'gentle art of making enemies'?"

"I'm not sure," laughed Nan in reply, "but I think it was Whistler. Why do you ask?"

"Because," replied Rhoda in the same low voice, "I think he must have had Linda or somebody just like her in mind, for she has the art down to perfection."

There would have been little dissent from Rhoda's verdict, for Linda had few real friends among the girls of Lakeview Hall. She was purse-proud and vulgar, and, though her money gave her a certain prestige among the shallow and unthinking, she lacked the qualities of mind and heart to endear herself to any one.

By this time the girls who were going with Nan

had taken their places on the sled. It was a new one that Nan had received as a present from her father, and it had not yet been tested. Nan had named it the *Silver Arrow,* and she had high hopes that its speed would justify the name.

Nan sat at the head, with the steering wheel in her hands. The wind had brought the roses to her cheeks, and her clear eyes shone like stars. Behind her in order sat Bess Harley, Rhoda Hammond, Grace Mason and Laura Polk, each girl holding tightly to the belt of the girl in front.

"All ready?" asked the professor.

"All ready, Professor," was Nan's reply, as her hands tightened on the wheel.

Professor Krenner lifted the bugle to his lips and gave a clear, sonorous blast that served at the same time as a signal for starting and as a warning to any one who might be crossing the path at the foot of the hill.

Then he tipped the sled over the ridge of the hill and it started on its journey.

For a mere fraction of a second it seemed to poise itself for flight. Then it moved, slowly at first, but gathering speed with every second, until it seemed to be flying like an arrow from the bow.

There were delighted and at the same time somewhat fearful squeals from the girls, as the wind whistled past their ears while the sled flew on at a speed that quickly reached a mile a minute. They

held on to each other for dear life, but Nan had no eyes or thought for anything except that shining ribbon of path.

She made the turn at the foot of the hill, the sled yielding to her slightest touch, and she only breathed freely when it shot out on the lake and there were no further obstacles to circumvent or fear.

On, on it went like a thing of life, as though it would never tire, and Nan's heart beat fast as she realized that she was going to make a better mark than she had ever done before.

But gradually the weight on the level surface began to tell, and the bobsled slowed up as though it were as reluctant as its passengers to find itself at its journey's end.

There was a chorus of joyous exclamations from the girls, as they rose to their feet and noted how far out they were on the lake.

"What a perfectly lovely sled!" exclaimed Rhoda Hammond. "I never had such a ride as that in my life."

"You darling!" said Nan impulsively, as she patted the wheel of her treasure.

"The other girls will have to go some to come anywhere near that mark," bubbled Bess.

"Linda will be green with jealousy," laughed Laura. "She thinks that that *Gay Girl* of hers is the fastest thing that ever wore runners."

"She'll take it as a personal affront if she doesn't

win," giggled Grace. "I wish she'd come along while we're here. I'd like to see just how far we've beaten her."

"We haven't beaten her yet," observed Nan, "and perhaps it's just as well not to be too sure. But now let's get our skates on and pull the sled back. There are to be three trials, you know."

They took their skates from their shoulders and adjusted them with nimble fingers. It was the work of only a few moments. Then they rose, patted down their dresses and struck out for the shore, drawing the sled behind them.

They had to keep a wary lookout for the other sleds. One came rushing along with its laughing crew, but they could see at a glance that it was not making the speed that their own had reached. Just as they reached the edge of the lake, another sled flew past, and amid the bevy of girls on it they discerned Linda Riggs.

"There goes the *Gay Girl,*" remarked Rhoda Hammond.

"And she's going like the wind, too," chimed in Bess a little anxiously. "Let's wait here a moment, girls. I want to see how far out she goes."

"I do hope she won't beat our mark," said Grace, as she snuggled her fur more closely about her neck.

They watched with straining eyes as Linda's sled gradually slowed up, and a sigh of relief came from

all when they saw that it stopped about a hundred feet this side of the spot that they had reached.

"She didn't beat us!" cried Bess exultantly.

"Too close to be comfortable, though," murmured Nan, as her eyes measured the distance.

"Well, a miss is as good as a mile," declared Rhoda.

"We're all right so far, as the man said as he was passing the second floor after falling seventeen stories," put in Laura.

"Let's get every ounce out of the *Silver Arrow* on the next try," adjured Grace, as, after having taken off their skates, they were trudging up the hill.

By the time they reached the top, most of the other sleds had been sent off and they had not long to wait. They settled themselves firmly in their seats.

"Let's clinch it now," laughed Nan, as she took the wheel. "Just put on your wishing caps and wish as hard as you can, and the *Silver Arrow* will do the rest."

"I'm wishing so hard that it hurts," gurgled Bess.

"If wishing will do it, we've won already," chimed in Laura. "We're all ready, Professor."

A clear call from the bugle, a helping hand over the ridge, and the *Silver Arrow* was off again.

It may have been due to the more slippery condition of the hill caused by the sleds that had al-

ready passed over it, but there was no doubt in the minds of the girls that the bobsled was going even more swiftly than it had at first. They were almost frightened at the speed it developed, and yet they were delighted, for they had set their minds on beating their earlier mark.

Halfway down the hill they passed Linda and her group, who had drawn up at one side to let them pass. Even at that breakneck rate of speed they could see the sneer on Linda's lips as she recognized the sled and its crew.

But they were nearing the curve now and Nan's eyes were fastened on the path ahead while she tightly gripped the wheel.

"Hold fast, girls!" she warned, as they neared the bend in the road and the sled swerved at her touch.

The next instant they rounded the curve, and a cry of horror burst from their lips.

Directly in their path was an elderly woman who had just started across the road.

She looked up as she heard them scream. Terror and bewilderment came into her face. She started back, then forward. Then, utterly paralyzed with fright, she stood helpless in the path of the bobsled that was rushing toward her with the speed of an express train.

The girls shouted at her, but her brain, numbed by fear, refused to act.

"Oh, she'll be killed!" wailed Grace.

"Oh, Nan, can't you do something?" cried Bess frantically.

Nan's brain was working like lightning. She was white to the lips, but never for an instant did she lose her presence of mind.

At the left of the road was an almost solid row of trees. It was certain death to turn that way. At the right there was an opening that led into a little glade. She determined to steer into that.

She swerved the sled in that direction. She could have made it if the woman had remained where she was. But just then she backed a step to the right. The sled struck her and hurled her aside, and she went down with a scream.

CHAPTER II

NEARLY A TRAGEDY

THE collision changed the direction of the bobsled, and by the merest fraction it escaped striking a tree. Nan, however, despite her mental anguish, kept her head and dexterously guided it into the glade, where it found soft snow and gradually came to a stop.

Then the frightened girls rose and rushed as fast as they could toward the victim of the accident, who was lying still in a heap of snow at the side of the road.

Nan dropped on the snow beside her and took her head in her arms, while Rhoda put her hand on the woman's heart.

"Oh," sobbed Grace, "we've killed her!"

"No, we haven't," replied Rhoda. "I can feel that her heart is beating. She's fainted, either from pain or fright or both, poor thing. We must help her."

"Here, Bess," directed Nan, "you hold her head while I see if any bones are broken. And you other girls take turns in chafing her hands. If she lives

near here we'll take her home and send for a doctor. If not, we'll take her up to the Hall."

The others followed Nan's directions and worked with frantic energy. And while the girls are trying to revive the unconscious stranger, it may be well for the sake of those who have not yet read the earlier volumes of this series to tell who Nan Sherwood is, and what experiences and adventures she and her friends have had up to the time at which the present story opens.

Mr. Sherwood was a foreman in the Atwater Mills in Tillbury, and "Papa Sherwood" and "Momsey" and Nan were a devoted and happy family in their pretty little cottage on Amity Street. Then the mills shut down for an indefinite length of time. The Sherwoods, with others even less well able to face the future, were staring poverty and the loss of their pretty home in the face, when suddenly, in the case of the Sherwoods, fortune took a hand and sent relief in the shape of a legacy from a distant relative of Mrs. Sherwood's.

To settle the business in connection with this legacy, Mr. and Mrs. Sherwood were called to Scotland. To the grief of all three, it was necessary that Nan should be left behind, but it was arranged that she should stay with her Uncle Henry, her father's brother, in a lumber camp in the Michigan Peninsula. What exciting adventures Nan had there and what she accomplished for good, can be

found in the first volume of this series, entitled: "Nan Sherwood at Pine Camp; or, The Old Lumberman's Secret."

Nan's best girl friend in Tillbury was Bess Harley. Bess was looking forward to going to school at Lakeview Hall, and, never having known any lack of money, could not understand why Nan would not say that she, too, would go. When the loss of Mr. Sherwood's position made even Bess see that it would be out of the question for Nan to go, she was inconsolable, for she was devoted to her friend, and rather dependent on her.

Nan Sherwood herself wanted to go to Lakeview Hall more than she had told either Bess or her parents, and when the legacy from Scotland made this possible the two girls were delighted and went wild with joy.

What they did at the Hall, the plucky spirit Nan showed on more than one occasion, and the friends they made are told of in the volume entitled: "Nan Sherwood at Lakeview Hall; or, The Mystery of the Haunted Boathouse."

Among the girls Nan and Bess met at Lakeview Hall was Grace Mason of Chicago. In "Nan Sherwood's Winter Holidays; or, Rescuing the Runaways" is described the visit that Nan and Bess made to the Mason home during the midwinter holidays. It is a record of parties and girlish fun, but in the midst of this Nan succeeded in helping two

foolish girls who had run far away from home.

On the opening of Lakeview Hall after those winter holidays a new girl came to the school. She was from the far West, and she did not at first understand or enter into the fun of the other girls. For a while she was without friends there, but gradually Nan Sherwood's sympathy and tact worked a change and Rhoda Hammond became one with the other girls.

She was not only grateful to Nan, but she became very fond of her. By this time Mr. Sherwood was well established in a business of his own, so when Rhoda asked Nan and Bess and Grace Mason and her brother Walter to go with her to her home in the West on a ranch, Nan, as well as the others, was able to accept. What exciting adventures the young people had at Rose Ranch, how stanchly they faced peril on one or two occasions, and what novel pleasures came to them, are all told of in "Nan Sherwood at Rose Ranch; or, The Old Mexican's Treasure."

And now let us go back to Nan and her chums and the poor woman who had brought the bobsled race to such an inglorious termination.

The ministrations of the excited girls to the poor woman soon produced an effect. The woman stirred uneasily, groaned, and at length opened her eyes, to the infinite relief of the girls, who had feared they had been participants in a tragedy.

Nan's deft fingers had in the meantime established the fact that no bones were broken, and she now spoke gently to the woman, whose eyes wandered from one face to another in a dazed fashion.

"I hope you are not badly hurt," Nan said kindly. "Do you feel much pain?"

"What am I doing here?" the woman asked. "What has happened?"

"Our sled struck you and knocked you down," answered Nan. "We did our best to steer out of the way, but we couldn't. I hope you are not much hurt."

A spasm of fear came into the face, which they could see was that of a woman about sixty years old.

"Oh, yes, I remember now," she said weakly. "I thought surely I was going to be killed. It all happened so sudden like."

She struggled into a sitting position, and the girls supported her head and shoulders.

"Tell us where you live," said Nan, "and we will take you home and send for a doctor. Or perhaps we had better take you right up to the school on top of the hill and take care of you there."

"Oh, I wouldn't want to give you young ladies so much trouble," answered the woman.

"Trouble, indeed!" protested Nan. "It's you that have had all the trouble, and there's nothing we can do for you that will make up for it."

"Do tell us where you live," urged Bess. "You ought to be in bed just as soon as you can. You'll catch your death out here in the snow."

"I live down on the Milltown road," the woman replied, "but I think I can get there without bothering you. Just help me up and you'll find that I'm able to walk all right."

She strove to rise to her feet as she spoke, the girls supporting her on each side, but her feet gave way under her and she would have fallen had they not sustained her.

"I'm afraid my ankle is broken," she murmured, as they eased her to a sitting position on the sled that thoughtful Rhoda had run and brought up to where the group were gathered.

"No," said Nan, "it isn't broken, I think; but it is very badly sprained. Now, girls, wrap her up well and then take hold of the ropes and we'll get her home just as soon as we possibly can. You live on the Milltown road, you say?" she went on, turning to the sufferer. "About how far is your home from here?"

"About a mile or a little more," was the answer. "It's just beyond the blacksmith's shop after you cross the bridge."

"I know where it is," interposed Grace. "I've often passed the place while out riding with Walter."

"You can show us the way then," said Nan, set-

ting the example to the others by taking hold of the rope. "Come along, girls, and we'll get there as soon as we can. Bess, hadn't you better go up the hill and tell the professor all about this, and then hurry and catch up with us?"

Bess did as her chum suggested, and the other girls started off at a brisk pace, drawing the sled with its burden after them.

CHAPTER III

THE OLD LADY

THE road was rather a difficult one, and several small hills had to be surmounted. The girls took turns in having one of them walk beside the sled with her hand steadying their passenger, who at times protested feebly against all the trouble she was making. She volunteered the information that her name was Sarah Bragley, that she was a widow, and that she had no kith or kin in the world as far as she knew. These facts redoubled the pity of the girls, and they mentally resolved that as long as they were at Lakeview Hall they would do all they could to make life more bearable for the frail and forlorn woman who had been brought into their lives in a way so unexpected and so nearly tragic.

In a little while Bess rejoined them, panting a little from the exertions she had made to catch up to them.

"It's all right," she announced. "I told Professor Krenner, and he told us to do all that we could, no matter how long it took, and said that he would explain the whole thing to Dr. Prescott. And Linda

Riggs was there, and what do you think she said? But I'll tell you about that some other time," she said, as she saw a spasm of pain come over the injured woman's face. "Here, let me get hold of that rope and we'll get on faster."

She took hold with a will, and the bobsled moved along rapidly until a little bridge that spanned the road over a small stream came into view. The stream now was a solid mass of ice.

"There's the bridge!" ejaculated Grace. "We can't be very far from the house now."

"And there's the blacksmith shop and a little house right beyond it," added Nan. "Is that your house?" she asked Mrs. Bragley, beside whom she was walking.

"That's it, dearie," was the answer. "It ain't much of a place," she added apologetically.

"It's a cunning little darling of a place," protested Rhoda, not quite truthfully, but so warm-heartedly that the recording angel probably did not lay it up against her.

"It's very nice," added Nan.

In a few minutes more they were before the tiny house, which seemed to consist of several rooms on one floor and a single room above. Everything about it suggested straightened means, and yet the girls noticed that the small windows were clean and hung with fresh dimity curtains, and that there were little flower boxes on the sills inside.

They drew the sled through the gate and up the path to the door.

"Have you the key?" Nan asked, as she took off her gloves.

"It isn't locked," Mrs. Bragley replied, with a faint smile. "There's nothing in there that would tempt anybody to steal. Just open the door and go right in."

Nan did as she was told. She found herself in what evidently served as a living-room and dining-room and kitchen combined. In a little room opening off to the right, she caught a glimpse of a bed. There was a wood stove with the embers of a fire in it, and the room was still fairly warm. Everything was as scrupulously neat as her first impression from without had led her to expect. But the scanty and worn furniture showed a desperate struggle with poverty that touched the girl's heart.

Under Nan's directions, the girls lifted Mrs. Bragley from the sled and gently deposited her in the one rocking chair that the apartment contained, first, however, placing a cushion in it to make it more comfortable.

"Now, girls," said Nan, "let's all get busy. In the first place, we want to get this fire going. Where do you keep your wood?" she asked, turning to the invalid.

"There's plenty of it in the little woodshed at the back," was the answer. "The neighbors always cut

enough for me to last me through the winter. But it's a shame that you should have to go for it," she called after Nan, who had already started for the woodshed.

Her protests were unheeded, and in a moment Nan was back, accompanied by Bess, who had gone with her, their arms full of wood which they laid beside the stove.

In a few minutes a cheerful fire was roaring in the stove. Then, following the directions of Mrs. Bragley, they found some tea and brewed it, and set out a little lunch which they pressed the woman to eat. The food and tea refreshed and revived her, and, as her shyness wore off, she talked with them freely.

Nan found some arnica with which she bathed the injured ankle, and then they helped their patient to undress and get into bed. And having done this, and seen that she was as comfortable as it was possible to make her, the girls withdrew into a corner to hold, as Nan expressed it, a "committee meeting to discuss ways and means."

"Now, girls, just what are we going to do?" demanded Nan, as her friends gathered round her with anxious looks on their faces.

"Take care of this poor woman until she is able to be on her feet again," responded Bess promptly. "We can't do less."

"Of course, that goes without saying," agreed

Nan. "We're the cause of her present trouble, and it's up to us to get her out of it. The only question is as to the best way to do it."

"Go ahead and tell us, Nan," urged Grace. "You've got the best head of any of us when it comes to an emergency like this."

"The first thing," suggested Nan, "is to get a doctor."

"I'm so glad it isn't an undertaker we have to call for," put in Grace, with a shudder.

"And the next," continued Nan, "is to find a nurse. The poor thing is utterly helpless just now with that hurt ankle. She can't even keep up the fire, and the weather's so cold she'd freeze to death if the fire went out."

"If we only had a telephone," murmured Rhoda, as her eye wandered over the place, though she knew beforehand that such an instrument would not be found in that poor cottage.

"Well, we haven't," replied Nan. "So I'll tell you what we'll do. Bess and I will stay here and try to make our patient as comfortable as we can. The rest of you girls had better go right up to the Hall and tell Dr. Prescott all about it. She'll have a doctor here in less than no time, and she or Mrs. Cupp will know of some nurse they can get in the town. We'll stay here anyway until they come. But the afternoon's going fast, and you want to hurry as much as you can. It will probably be dark any-

how when the doctor and the nurse get here, and, as we don't know the road very well, we don't want to be too late in getting back to the Hall."

"You needn't worry about that," said Grace, as she put on her wraps. "I'll 'phone to Walter as soon as I get to the Hall and he'll come over and take you home."

"In that case I'd better go along with you now," put in Bess, with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "I'm afraid it will be a case where two is company and three's a crowd."

"Don't talk such nonsense," said Nan, though a slight flush had risen to her cheeks at her chum's raillery. "But, girls, before you go there's one other thing; and that is, the matter of money. I don't suppose," she went on, lowering her voice lest the invalid should hear, "that the poor woman has anything of any account. How much money have you girls with you?"

What the warm-hearted girls had with them at the moment was very little, but what it was they all handed over, and the total amounted to several dollars.

"Of course we'll all club together and see that she has all she needs to get through this trouble," declared Laura, and there was a unanimous chorus of assent.

"And now, shoo!" commanded Nan, as she opened the door to hasten their exit. "And see how quickly

you can get the nurse and the doctor here. Don't bother about the sled. We'll bring that along when we come, or send over after it to-morrow."

The three girls promised to hurry, and made off. Nan and Bess watched them until they had passed out of sight beyond the bridge, and then turned to look after their patient.

CHAPTER IV

SOLVING A PROBLEM

THE girls tiptoed into the little room at the right and saw that Mrs. Bragley was not asleep. As they approached the bed she greeted them with a faint smile.

"It's too bad that you should have all this trouble," she said. "Here I've gone and spoiled all your afternoon's fun just because I was too slow and stupid to get out of your way."

"It wasn't your fault at all," declared Bess warmly. "I know I'd have been scared stiff if I'd seen that sled bearing down upon me. The thing we're grateful for is that you weren't killed."

"How are you feeling now?" asked Nan gently, as she adjusted the bedclothes.

"Rather poorly," was the answer. "My ankle's hurting me a good deal. And then I have a sort of all-gone feeling. But I suppose that's on account of the shock. But I'll be all right by to-morrow," the woman hurried to say bravely.

"We've sent for a doctor and a nurse," Nan explained. "They'll be here in a little while."

A worried look came into the woman's pale and drawn face.

"A doctor? A nurse?" she repeated. "That's good of you, my dears, but I can get along all right without them. And besides, besides——"

She hesitated, and Nan, who guessed what she was thinking of, hastened to reassure her.

"Don't worry about anything," she urged. "There won't be any expense. It's our fault that you are hurt, and the very least we can do is to see that it doesn't cost you anything to get well. You just leave it to us, please."

Tears came into the poor woman's eyes.

"How good you are!" she said brokenly. "There was a time when I had money enough to get along comfortably, but that was before my husband died. He thought that he was leaving me enough to take care of me for the rest of my life. But somehow or other I guess I've been cheated out of it or lost it somehow. It's all mixed up in my mind, and I don't exactly know the rights of it. I never did have any head for business, anyhow."

"There, there," said Nan soothingly, as she feared that her patient was getting excited. "You can tell us all about it some other time. Let me fix your pillows now and you try to get some sleep before the doctor comes."

She brought a cooling drink, and then she and Bess withdrew into the other room and conversed

in low tones until, just before dark, the doctor made his appearance.

He was a big, cheery man, who radiated confidence as he bustled into the room after tying his horse to the fence outside.

"Oh, Dr. Willis, I'm so glad you've come!" exclaimed Nan, as the doctor came in and drew off his gloves.

"Just a bit of luck that I was able to get here so soon," the doctor responded. "I was just going out on another call when a girl rang me up from the school and told me of the accident. She was so excited that she stuttered, but I managed to make out what she was driving at and hurried over at once. Where is the patient?"

They took him into the room, and he made a quick but thorough examination.

"No bones broken," he announced, and the girls drew a sigh of relief. "But there's a bad sprain and she won't be able to get around for a couple of weeks."

He bandaged the injured ankle and prepared some medicine, which he left with careful directions to the girls.

"I'll drop in again to-morrow," he said. "Sorry that I can't take you girls back and drop you at the Hall, but she oughtn't to be left alone. I can take one of you, though," and he looked inquiringly from one to the other.

"You had better go, Bess," said Nan promptly.

"What! and leave you alone?" cried Bess. "Indeed not."

"But we can't both go."

"I am not going to leave you, Nan. We'll both stay."

"Well, it won't be for so very long anyway," remarked Nan. She turned to the physician. "It is very good of you to ask us."

"It sure is," added Bess, quickly. And then she added, with a cloud on her face, "You are sure Mrs. Bragley is going to get over it?"

"Oh, yes, she'll get over it. But it will take time," answered the doctor; and a few minutes later the medical man took his departure.

"He certainly is a nice man," said Nan, as she and her chum watched him go.

"A man one is bound to have confidence in," added Bess.

He had not been gone five minutes when there was a sound of sleighbells, and a cutter, drawn by a spirited horse, dashed up to the gate. The girls peered through the windows, but in the dark, which had now fully settled down, could not identify the newcomer. A moment later there as a knock at the door, and, on opening it, Walter Mason came in with a rush, accompanied more sedately by an elderly woman with a kindly, capable face.

"Why, Walter!" exclaimed Nan, and a close ob-

server might have noted her heightened color. "How splendid it was of you to get here so quickly."

Bess had it on the tip of her tongue to say that she could guess why he had hurried, but she wisely forebore.

Walter Mason was a frank, fine-looking young man, with whom the girls had become acquainted through his sister Grace. Nan and he had been thrown much together, especially during the visit that Nan had made to Grace at the Mason home in Chicago, and a mutual liking had developed that had grown stronger with time. The girls had often teased Nan about Walter, but she had parried their thrusts good-naturedly, and stoutly maintained that Walter was simply a nice boy and good company. But she was undeniably glad to see him, though she tried to explain to herself that it was the prospect of soon getting back to the Hall that pleased her.

After the first greeting, Walter introduced his companion as a Mrs. Ellis, who had agreed to come along to nurse the patient until she had fully recovered.

Mrs. Ellis, in a quiet, capable way, took charge at once, and the girls felt the load of responsibility that they had carried all the afternoon lighten promptly.

"Oh, I'd nearly forgotten!" Walter exclaimed suddenly, and ran out to the sleigh, whence he re-

turned in a moment loaded down with food and jellies and supplies of various kinds.

"We stopped on our way through the village," he explained, as he placed the packages on the table, "and Mrs. Ellis picked out the things that we ought to bring along. Here they are. And now if you girls will get your things on, I'll hustle you over to the Hall. You must be awfully hungry."

They had not thought of that, but now that he spoke of it they realized that he was right. They went in and spoke cheerily to Mrs. Bragley, promising to be over the next day to see how she was getting along, and then, followed by her tears and blessings, they put on their wraps and furs and with a cordial farewell to the nurse they hurried off, not, however, until Walter had brought in and stacked up enough firewood to last for several days.

The cold, crisp air was like a tonic, and their spirits rose as the horse drew the cutter after him over the snowy road at a rate of speed that promised to bring them to the Hall all too soon.

"That was a close call you girls had this afternoon," Walter remarked, as they left the little house behind them.

"It surely was," agreed Bess, with a little shiver that was not due to the cold. "It was lucky for us that Nan kept her head. The rest of us were screaming, but Nan didn't make a sound. If she'd steered an inch to the right or to the left from what

she did, we'd have gone into a tree, and that would have been the end of us."

"She's a thoroughbred," declared Walter briefly. "That's just the way she acted the day your boat upset. Nan certainly has nerve."

"There are the lights of the Hall," interrupted Nan, glad of an excuse to divert attention from herself. "How beautiful they look on a night like this."

"They'd look a good deal more beautiful to me if they were further off," grumbled Walter, as he reluctantly turned into the drive that led to Lakeview Hall.

CHAPTER V

CALLED TO ACCOUNT

THE cutter drew up with a flourish and a jingle of bells at the main door of Lakeview Hall, and Walter Mason helped the girls out.

"So good of you to bring us over," said Nan, as Walter's hand held hers for perhaps a second more than was absolutely necessary.

"Tickled to death to have the chance," replied the youth. "And say, Nan, count me in on that subscription for Mrs. Bragley."

"Thanks just as much," was Nan's response, as she and Bess ran up the steps, "but I imagine you've done more than your share already. Who paid for all those good things you brought over in your sleigh? Answer me that."

"Give you three guesses," laughed Walter. "And now, good night, girls. Tell me when you're going over again and I'll be here with the cutter."

Another moment and he was off with a farewell wave of the hand, and Nan and Bess entered the Hall, where they speedily found themselves the cen-

ter of a chattering bevy of girls, all trying to talk at once.

"Tell us all about it, Nan," pleaded Rhoda Hammond. "Did the doctor get there?"

"Was Mrs. Bragley badly hurt?" asked Laura.

"Not seriously," answered Nan. "The doctor and the nurse both came, and everything is going on all right. She'll be able to walk again in a couple of weeks, they think."

"Don't tell them another word, Nan Sherwood, until we have had something to eat," laughed Bess. "I'm just dying from hunger, and I suppose we're late now for supper."

Linda Riggs, who had been standing apart with a sneer on her lips, turned to Cora Courtney and said in a voice that was not so low but all could hear:

"So that's why she stayed to nurse the old woman; so she could get a ride home with Walter Mason. She's foxy, all right."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Linda Riggs!" Bess Harley cried hotly. But Nan laid her hand soothingly on her arm.

"Never mind her, Bess," she counseled with a level glance at Linda. "What else can you expect? Let's go in to supper."

"Linda is peeved because the *Gay Girl* was beaten this afternoon," laughed Laura Polk. "You know she thought she had a mortgage on the race."

"Was she beaten?" asked Bess, with eager inter-

est. "I declare, my mind's been so full of the accident that I'd almost forgotten that we had a race."

"Yes," replied Laura gleefully. "She was beaten by more than a hundred feet."

"And she had three chances where we had only one," put in Rhoda. "We might have beaten our own mark if we had had our full number of trips."

"There's not much of the sport about Linda," commented Grace. "Any one who beats her makes her an enemy. She takes it as a personal insult if any one dares to get ahead of her."

"She can't be any more of an enemy to us than she always has been," concluded Bess. "But come along, Nan, and let's eat. My appetite's keener than ever, now that I know we won."

"Was there ever anything the matter with your appetite, Bess?" questioned Nan with a smile.

"Sometimes—not often. But, oh, Nan! neither of us would have had much appetite if we had seriously injured that poor woman."

"You are right there. Every time I think of the narrow escape we had I have to shiver."

"Yes, and supposing the sled had gone into a tree, or one of those sharp rocks! Oh, it would have been dreadful!"

"We can count ourselves very lucky."

"And to think we won the race after all! That's the best news I've heard in a long time."

"Oh, no, Bess. The best news is our escape, and

Mrs. Bragley's, from serious injury. The race doesn't count alongside of that."

"Well, maybe you are right. Nevertheless, I am awfully glad we won."

The rest of the girls had already had their supper, but there was plenty left, and Nan and Bess did full justice to it. They had scarcely finished when a message came to Nan that Dr. Prescott, the head of the school, wished to see her.

"I always feel nervous when I hear that Doctor Beulah wants to see me," remarked Laura, the madcap of the school. "But perhaps Nan has a better conscience than I usually have. Run along now, Nan, and take your medicine, and then come back and tell us all about it."

Nan went at once to the principal's room, and was graciously received by the serene, handsome woman who directed the activities of Lakeview Hall.

Dr. Beulah Prescott was a woman of culture and marked executive ability. For many years she had been the head of the school, and had won for it an enviable position among institutions of its kind. She had a large and valuable clientele, which was constantly expanding.

She was an extremely good-looking woman, and exquisitely groomed and dressed, although with an utter absence of ostentation. She knew the value of appearance, especially before the critical eyes of her schoolgirls, and never allowed herself to be seen

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at a disadvantage. Her rule was mild, but just and firm, and all the girls knew that she was not to be trifled with. Behind her back they often referred to her as Doctor Beulah, but none permitted herself any familiarity in her presence. Her poise was perfect. No one had ever seen her angry or flustered. When she did not inspire ardent affection, she always commanded the genuine respect of her pupils.

She greeted Nan pleasantly as the latter entered, and asked her to be seated.

"I hear you came near having a serious accident this afternoon, Nan," she said, "and I have sent for you to have you tell me all about it."

Nan told in detail the events of the afternoon, and the doctor listened with keen interest, interrupting once in a while to make some incident perfectly clear.

"It was a very narrow escape," she commented, when Nan had finished. "I am thankful beyond words that none of the girls was hurt or killed, as they so easily might have been. And I want to congratulate you on the way you played your part. I notice you left that out of your story, but others have already told me how cool and clear-headed you were through it all. I'm glad that you happened to be steering."

Nan flushed at the words of praise, and murmured rather uncomfortably that she had done only what any other of the girls would have done in her place.

"I differ with you there," replied Dr. Prescott, with a smile. "But we won't discuss that. What must be done is to make the coasting safer in the future. After this, I will have some one stationed at that crossing to warn passers-by. As for that poor woman, I will see that all the expenses of her illness are paid and that she is compensated besides for the fright and pain she has undergone."

"Pardon me, Dr. Prescott," said Nan with some diffidence, "but the girls feel that they ought to do most of the helping. They have already contributed a little, and they are planning to do more."

"A very commendable feeling," agreed the head of the school graciously. "But at least you will let me help. I know Mrs. Bragley. She is a very worthy woman."

"She seems to be," remarked Nan. "Her little house is poor, but everything about it is neat and clean. I gathered from some things she said that she used to be in fairly comfortable circumstances."

"That is true," was the response. "Her husband was a hard-working man and had saved up some money. But he was inclined to invest his savings in rather risky enterprises, and I imagine he was swindled out of most of it. It seems to me that I have heard something of that kind, though I don't recall it clearly."

"I would like to go over to the cottage as often as I can in the next few days to see what I can do

to help, if you have no objections," remarked Nan.

"None whatever," rejoined Dr. Prescott. "In fact, I shall be very glad to have you do so, provided, of course, that you don't let it interfere with your school work. You can go now, Nan. You must be tired after the strain and excitement of this afternoon, and I would suggest that you go to bed early."

Nan bade the principal good-night and hurried up to her room, where she found a group of her special friends all on the *qui vive* to learn of her interview.

CHAPTER VI

A GLORIOUS PROSPECT

"HAIL, the conquering heroine comes!" cried Rhoda Hammond, as Nan entered the room.

"I see she didn't eat you up," remarked Bess with a smile.

"I suppose you are disappointed," laughed Nan, as she threw herself into a chair. "It would have been delightfully exciting if she had, wouldn't it? But talking of eating, let me have some of those chocolates, you stingy thing."

The last remark was addressed to Laura, who languidly took up the box of confections and handed it over to Nan.

"Where's Grace?" asked Nan, as she helped herself and cast her eyes over the group.

The question was answered by Grace herself, who at that moment burst into the room, waving a letter excitedly in her hand.

"Oh, girls, what do you think?" she exclaimed breathlessly.

"We never think," drawled Laura. "At least, my teachers tell me that I never do."

"Has some distant relative died and left you a fortune?" hazarded Bess.

"Better than that," cried Grace jubilantly.

"Can anything be better than that?" queried Laura.

"Tell us, Grace," adjured Nan. "Don't keep us on the anxious seat."

"I'm going to Palm Beach!" exclaimed Grace joyously. "Do you hear, girls? I'm going to Palm Beach for the winter holidays!"

The girls sprang up at the news and crowded around Grace.

"Palm Beach!" gasped Rhoda almost breathlessly.

"Why, Gracie Mason!" exclaimed Nan, "you must be talking in your sleep."

"You don't really and truly mean Palm Beach, Florida?" cried Laura, nearly choking on the big chocolate that slipped down her throat at the astounding news.

"I really mean Palm Beach, Florida," reiterated Grace, thoroughly enjoying the sensation she had created.

"Oh, you lucky, lucky girl!" breathed Bess, who until now had seemed too stunned by the news to utter a word.

"Lucky. Well, I should say," chimed in Laura. "Some people are born lucky, and Grace Mason is the luckiest of them all."

"How I wish I could go with you!" mourned Rhoda enviously.

"You can just guess we all wish that," acquiesced Nan. "You surely were born with a golden spoon in your mouth, Grace."

"It has been the dream of my life to go to Palm Beach," put in Rhoda.

"Now, Grace, just sit down here and tell us all about it," commanded Nan. "Every syllable. Do you hear?"

She piloted Grace to the biggest chair in the room and seated herself on one arm of it, while the others clustered around as closely as possible.

"Well," began Grace, "mother and dad have been thinking about it for some time, but they wouldn't tell us about it until the last minute because they wanted to surprise us. Just as soon as I got the news, I flew right over here to tell you girls about it."

"It's too splendid!" exclaimed Laura. "Where are you going to stay while you are there? Or perhaps it's too early to have settled that yet."

"At the Royal Poinciana," replied Grace happily. "Oh, my!"

"The Royal Poinciana!" exclaimed all the girls in one breath.

"Why, Grace," marveled Rhoda. "That's the very swellest hotel even in Palm Beach."

"Well, what of that?" smiled Grace. "Can't we

go to the swellest hotel if we want to?—and if dad's cash holds out?"

"No reason in the world, if you're lucky enough to be able to," was Rhoda's envious reply. "It costs a small fortune to live there even for a short time, as I suppose you know."

"I suppose," chaffed Laura, "that you'll be so stuck up when you get back that you won't speak to your old friends."

"No danger of that," laughed Grace, as she looked lovingly about at the eager faces of her friends.

"How long are you going to stay?" queried Nan.

"I don't know yet," answered Grace slowly. "The holidays last for only two weeks, you know, and mother and dad are so anxious that I shouldn't lose anything of my school course that they'll probably send me back at the end of the two weeks, though they may stay a little longer. I only wish the holidays were four weeks long instead of two."

"How are you ever coming back after two weeks of that sort of life?" asked Laura. "If I were only lucky enough once to get there I'd never want to come back."

"Just think of what *fun* you can have there," remarked Bess Harley. "I suppose you'll play tennis. What joy to be able to play tennis and get your nose sunburned in the middle of winter. Think of you playing tennis in Palm Beach sunshine while we are shivering around fires."

"And golf?" suggested Nan.

"Not that," laughed Grace. "I don't know a mashie from a cleek."

"Of course there'll be boating," suggested Bess.

"And bathing," added Laura with emphasis. "Oh, Grace, I'm just dying of envy! Think of bathing in January with the water as warm as it is here in August!"

"Take care you don't get drowned, Gracie," warned Nan, in mock seriousness. "And look out for sharks. I hear that they're seen occasionally at Palm Beach."

"For goodness' sake, Nan!" cried Laura reprovingly, "don't even suggest anything unpleasant in connection with that celestial spot. There's nothing to be found there but pure, unalloyed bliss."

"Only think of the dances at the hotel!" said Bess, with shining eyes.

"And the fellows," put in Laura mischievously. "Oh, Grace, Grace, what opportunities for sitting out dances on those wonderful balconies!"

"And the long strolls in the moonlight," added Nan, giving Grace a nudge with her elbow.

"Or sitting on the beach with some eligible young millionaire, listening to the waves beating on the sand," teased Rhoda.

"Oh, it's all too wonderful!" exclaimed Laura, suddenly starting up and pulling Grace out of the chair.

Forgetting the lateness of the hour, she started in a mad whirl about the room.

"Hush!" cautioned Nan, as a firm footfall was heard in the corridor.

In a twinkling two motionless forms lay in Nan's bed. Rhoda had switched off the light, and the high backs of chairs and sofa hid crouching figures, while the almost too regular breathing of the supposed sleepers was the only sound to be heard when the door opened and the severe and angular form of Mrs. Cupp stood outlined in the dim light from the corridor.

CHAPTER VII

IN THE DORMITORY

After a survey of several minutes of the dark and seemingly innocent room, the guardian of school discipline seemed satisfied, closed the door, and her footsteps died away at the end of the hall.

If she could have heard the bursts of smothered laughter as the lights were turned on and Laura and Bess, almost exhausted by their efforts to keep up that steady breathing, tumbled from the bed and the others rose from their hiding places and shook and stretched themselves to get the cramps out of their limbs!

"That was a close call," gurgled Nan, breathless with suppressed laughter, while Grace asked chokingly:

"How did you ever do that sleeping act so perfectly and keep it up so long?"

"Just genius," answered Laura complacently. "I got so in the spirit of it that I came near snoring."

"Is that so?" scoffed Rhoda. "Strange that we never noticed it before."

"Live and learn," replied Laura, nonchalantly.

"The explanation is simple. Just lack of perception. 'Ye have eyes and ye see not.'"

"For pity's sake, keep still, you two," said Bess. "We have too many things to talk about to listen to repartee, even to such brilliant specimens."

"Snubbed!" groaned Laura, as she lifted the last bonbon from the box.

"Here, greedy," said Rhoda. "I saw that candy first."

"Well, I ate it first," grinned Laura tantalizingly.

"Will you girls keep still?" cried Bess despairingly. "I want to find out what Grace is going to wear."

"Yes, sweetheart," said Rhoda meekly, as she flopped down into the nearest seat at hand. "That is really a most interesting and all-important question, and we will come to that anon. But first I want to remark that I feel as though we had been nearly caught at a regular spread."

"Spread! Where have I heard that word before?" exclaimed Laura dramatically. "Isn't it time we had a regular one? I tell you what, girls, let's celebrate by having a real honest-to-goodness spread. There's a reason."

"As if you ever needed a reason for having a spread!" laughed Bess. "But I second the motion."

"I'm expecting a box from home any minute," said Rhoda, "and I'll donate it to the cause."

"I'll furnish the fruit," Grace offered.

"Dandy!" exclaimed Laura. "Put me down for cocoa and milk and sugar. Will you supply the sandwiches, Nan?"

"I'm willing to furnish the sandwiches," agreed Nan, a little doubtfully. "But do you think we'd better have it just now?"

"Oh, come on, Nan," urged Laura. "Be a sport. Isn't Grace worth a chance?"

And Nan, unwilling to spoil the others' sport, assented, though with some inward misgiving.

"Can't we go to town to-morrow after recitations, and get the things?" Bess proposed.

"O. K.," acquiesced Laura contentedly. "And now to return to the vital question. What, Grace darling, are you going to wear at Palm Beach?"

"I'd like to get new gowns and things," Grace replied; "but it's hard to get summer clothes in winter. Of course, I've got last summer's things."

"I'd feel that I was pretty well fitted out already if I had *your* last summer's things," observed Laura.

"I should say as much!" agreed Rhoda. "The idea of Grace Mason needing a new summer outfit. What's the objection to that lovely crêpe de chine that made me green with envy when you wore it last summer?"

"Or that voile with the heliotrope flowers?" supplemented Nan. "Or the white net with the embroidered flounces?"

"Or that blue taffeta that you looked so stunning in at the garden party?" said Rhoda.

"Or the old rose georgette with the touch of black velvet, to say nothing of half a dozen others?" added Bess.

"Since you are resurrecting the old gowns so vigorously," laughed Grace, "I begin to think I may get through without so many new things after all, especially as the old gowns will be new to the people I shall meet at Palm Beach. Of course mother will have a dressmaker, and she'll alter and freshen up and make a few new things. But she can't do such a very great deal in the little time from now to the holidays. If it was any other place than Palm Beach, I wouldn't even think about dress. But it's such a very swell place, you know, girls, and I don't want to feel out of place while I'm there. Of course you know how I feel."

"Sure we do," Laura assured her. "But I'll guarantee that with what you have and what you'll be able to add, you'll feel very much in it, even at Palm Beach."

"And now, ladies," said Rhoda, "that the all-important subject of dress is disposed of, I move that Nan pass around for our refreshment those fine Florida oranges I see on the table there."

Nan laughingly complied, and Bess suddenly exclaimed as she peeled the rind from her orange:

"This reminds me, Grace. How will it seem to

be walking through lovely orange groves with the beautiful golden fruit showing between the leaves?"

"And," Nan supplemented, "to be able to pick and eat the oranges with the warmth of the sun upon them! I have heard that the flavor is very different from what we are accustomed to."

"And imagine," Rhoda added longingly, "not only being able to feast on the delicious oranges but to have the fragrance of the wonderful blossoms all around you as you walk through the groves."

"Oh, girls, girls!" cried Grace, "you make me impatient to be there at this very minute. There's one thing," she added quizzically, "if no other orange blossoms ever come my way, I'll at least have had those."

"No need for you to worry about that," returned Laura, "with that young Palm Beach millionaire—or is it billionaire?—waiting to greet you and some day crown that fair brow of thine with fragrant orange blooms. Methinks I can already smell their fragrance and hear the strains of the justly celebrated wedding march of Mendelssohn."

"What vivid imaginations some people have," returned Grace calmly.

"Oh, dear," sighed Nan musingly, "doesn't it seem a shame that everybody can't have wonderful things? If only a very small part of the surplus wealth could be divided among those who are struggling just to live, what a different world this would

be. It doesn't seem right that so many people should have everything and others have little else than work and worry. Those people at Palm Beach have wealth, luxury, everything to make life splendid, while others have so little. Things certainly are uneven in this world. Take Mrs. Bragley, for instance."

"I tell you what we'll do, girls," said Grace impulsively. "We'll make a spread for Mrs. Bragley as well as for ourselves."

"Fine!" ejaculated Rhoda. "We'll fill a basket with canned meat and some potatoes and——"

"No, no," interrupted Grace impulsively, "not those things. Let's give her a real spread with something out of the ordinary."

"Jellies," proposed Bess.

"Glass jars of imported strawberries and cherries," suggested Laura.

"A great bunch of those wonderful California grapes," contributed Grace.

"And some Florida oranges," added Nan.

"Great!" commented Grace. "When shall we do it?"

"Let's see," mused Nan. "We have our Latin class at two. We'll be through by three. Let's make it three-thirty o'clock to-morrow."

"I'm afraid you'll have to go without me," said Grace. "I promised mother I'd answer her letter right away, so I'll have to get that off to-morrow."

"I can't go either," said Laura. "I have those French exercises to make up before to-morrow night. I'd like to go, but I suppose I can't with that to do."

"Then, Bess," said Nan, "you and Rhoda and I will be a committee of three to wait on Mrs. Bragley to-morrow."

"Girls, isn't it warm in here?" questioned Laura.

"Warm? With the heating plant broken down?" queried Nan.

"It feels warm and I'm going to open a window," went on Laura, and, suiting the action to the word, she shoved up a window that was handy.

"Birr!" came from several of the others.

"My, but that's cold!"

"We'll all get sick!"

"I know a way to fix Laura!" cried Rhoda, and, as she spoke, the girl from Rose Ranch leaned out of the window and reached upward.

"What are you going to do?" asked Bess.

"Get an icicle for her," answered Rhoda, and a moment later brought to view an icicle she had broken away from a projection above the window. The icicle was all of a foot and a half long and an inch or more in thickness.

"No, you don't!" cried Laura, leaping away as Rhoda came after her with the bit of ice. "Don't you dare to put that thing down my neck!"

"It will cool you off, Laura," said Rhoda; but

just then she slipped and went down, shattering the icicle into fragments.

"No more noise," whispered Bess, closing the window.

At that moment, Nan's clock, sounding the first stroke of midnight, startled the girls.

"The hour indeed waxeth late," whispered Laura, and vanished.

One by one the others noiselessly followed. There was the almost inaudible sound of softly closing doors, and quiet reigned over Lakeview Hall.

In Nan's room for the second time that night there was the sound of measured breathing, but this time it was genuine.

CHAPTER VIII

ON THE ROAD

"UGH!" shivered Nan the next morning when she came into the room after her bath. "This isn't Palm Beach, is it, Bess? More like the North Pole, eh?"

"Palm Beach," echoed Bess disgustedly, as she reluctantly slipped out of her warm bed and reached for her bathrobe. "It reminds me of it—it's so different. When that horrid old rising gong sounded, I was dreaming that I was there standing on the beach ready for a swim. I can feel that warm sand about my feet now," and she gave her cold little feet a vicious shove into her far from warm bedroom slippers.

"I don't believe Grace has slept much," smiled Nan.

"I know she hasn't," returned Bess, as she hurriedly dressed. "I'm sure I wouldn't have slept a wink if I had been in her place. I believe I'd just die if I were."

"Then," returned Nan cheerfully, fastening the last snapper in her belt, "I'm exceedingly glad you're

not in Grace's place, for I prefer to see you alive a little longer."

They found Grace and Rhoda already in the lower hall, and knew by their flushed faces that last night's news was still the fascinating topic of conversation. All joined in, and were soon so absorbed that Laura's voice made them start.

"Beginning where you left off last night?" she was asking. "I don't believe Grace went to bed at all, but just sat up and anticipated all night long."

"Not quite so bad as that," laughed Grace. "I went to bed, but I confess that I was too excited to sleep very much."

"It's perfectly safe to say that all of us dreamed of Palm Beach, anyway," Bess conjectured.

"I did," replied Laura, chuckling at the remembrance. "I dreamed I was standing on one of those great broad piazzas. The moon was shining so brightly that the palm trees stood out clearly, and the gleam of the spray could be plainly seen as the breakers came rolling up on the beach. The air was warm and delightful, and I was thinking how happy I was to be there and of you unlucky girls shivering here at Lakeview Hall, when a gong clanged, some one shouted 'fire,' and smoke came pouring out of the hotel windows. I was so frightened I woke up and found that old rising gong getting in its work. I tell you, girls, I was mad enough to bite somebody."

"Serves you right for leaving us here to freeze when you could so easily have taken us with you," joked Nan.

Several times while the girls were chatting, Linda Riggs and Cora Courtney had passed very close to them in an effort to hear what they were so excitedly talking about. But the girls had purposely lowered their voices till, when the two passed, they were talking in whispers. It was a great satisfaction to get Linda so keyed up with curiosity.

"Some people are afraid to speak aloud," Linda remarked to Cora, during one of their walks past the group, "because they don't dare let people know what they're talking about."

"They seem to think it's smart to be mysterious," sniffed Cora.

But when they reached the end of the corridor, Linda stopped and said:

"What do you suppose they are talking about anyway? I bet they are hatching up something. I'd give my eyes to find out what it is, especially if Nan Sherwood is in it."

"You love her, don't you?" Cora asked sarcastically.

"As I love poison ivy," Linda snapped vindictively. "I never could bear her."

"She was ordered to Doctor Beulah's room yesterday," said Cora. "I bet she got a calling down for nearly killing that woman."

"That's something I never did," sneered Linda; "nearly kill any one. Of course, I'm glad no serious harm came to the woman. I don't want to see her hurt. But what fun it would have been, to see Nan Sherwood up in court for manslaughter."

Just at that moment Bess Harley, who had gone up to her room for a handkerchief, came down the stairs and heard the spiteful remark. Shocked and indignant, she said angrily:

"Of course, Linda Riggs, I know what makes you say those horrid things about Nan. It's because she beat you in the race yesterday. And that wasn't the last time, either. She'll always beat you, because she's worth a dozen of you."

Bess had unconsciously raised her voice, and Nan, hearing the angry words, came quickly, and, laying her hand soothingly on her chum's arm, said:

"Don't mind, dear, come along," and drew her gently away.

They passed into the breakfast room, while Linda, who had found no answer ready, looked after them vindictively.

She turned to Cora, and, giving her foot a vicious stamp, said:

"Never mind, I'll see that Nan Sherwood gets all that's coming to her."

"What do you mean?" asked Cora, her curiosity aroused.

"I haven't thought it all out," snapped Linda, "but

I have an idea, a big idea. I'll tell you what it is later."

Lessons rather dragged that morning. The girls were impatient to get together and talk. A thousand things they had heard and read of the glories of Palm Beach came between them and the printed page, and questions that burned to be asked would persist in pushing their lessons from their minds. Everybody was relieved by the ripple of laughter that went round the class when Laura, a question of capital cities coming up, slipped and said that the capital of Florida was the Royal Poinciana.

Her teacher stared.

"I beg your pardon, Laura?" she said frigidly.

Laura reddened.

"I—I—meant Palm Beach," she stammered. "Er—er—I should say, I meant Tallahassee."

The girls who were in the secret of Grace's forthcoming trip giggled and looked meaningly at each other, and the recitation went on. But the slowest quarter hours will pass at last, and on this day they merged into hours and finally brought three o'clock and freedom.

"That's over at last! Did you ever live through such a long day?" asked Nan, as she put away her books and took her coat from the form. "Now for Mrs. Bragley."

"But first," said Bess, snatching up a small bonbon dish from the table, "we've got to have funds,

and 'the collection will now be taken.' My, but you girls are generous!" she exclaimed exultantly, after she had counted up the donations. "Mrs. Bragley is going to have *some* spread!"

The committee of three went around by way of the town in order to purchase materials for the surprise spread for the woman they had run down. When the basket was filled they fairly reveled in the attractiveness of its contents. Boxes of crisp delicate crackers, tumblers of jelly, jars of imported strawberries and cherries, a bunch of California grapes that Rhoda said she was sure would weigh three pounds, and some unusually fine Florida oranges. Piling the basket on the sled that they had brought with them, they started gaily off, dragging it behind them.

After they had covered half the distance a voice hailed them, and Walter came dashing up behind them in his cutter. Reining in the spirited horse he was driving, he cried:

"Jump in, girls. It's a dandy day for a spin."

But they laughingly refused.

"Too many of us for that cutter," said Rhoda. "We'd make an awful load."

"And we don't want any men around anyway, today," laughed Bess.

Walter heard, but he saw only Nan's glowing face. What he thought about that face was plainly to be read in his eyes.

"Isn't there anything that I can do for you?" he asked. "Don't you want me to run the basket up to the cottage for you?"

"No, thanks," replied Nan. "We're getting along finely. It's awfully good of you, just the same."

Walter chirped to his horse, still with his eyes on Nan's smiling face, and, lifting his hat, drove on.

CHAPTER IX

THE JOY OF GIVING

After Walter left it did not take the girls with their sled long to reach Sarah Bragley's modest little cottage.

Mrs. Ellis opened the door at their knock.

"How is Mrs. Bragley to-day?" Nan asked, as they went in.

"As well as can be expected," replied the nurse. "She had a little fever last night, but not enough to be at all anxious about."

"Has the doctor been here to-day?" queried Rhoda.

"Yes," was the reply, "about an hour ago."

"What did he say?"

"He says she is doing very well," Mrs. Ellis answered. "The only thing that gives him any concern is her lack of appetite. If he can coax that, he thinks she will soon be well."

"Perhaps these things will tempt her," remarked Nan, as she emptied the contents of the basket upon the table.

"How splendid!" exclaimed the nurse. "They are

just the things she needs. I'll go and tell her that you are here, and you can take them in to her."

Left alone, the girls glanced around them. A warm fire blazed in the stove. Everything in the room was spotless.

"Doesn't it look nice?" observed Bess.

"Couldn't be any neater or more comfortable," judged Nan with satisfaction. "I'm so glad we could get Mrs. Ellis."

"She's a jewel, and no mistake," affirmed Rhoda.

At Mrs. Ellis' invitation, the three girls trooped into Mrs. Bragley's room. They were delighted to find her propped up in bed and looking very cheerful and comfortable.

"I'm glad to see you, young ladies," was her greeting to them. And she looked with pleasure into the bright faces as the girls clustered about the bed.

"You are feeling pretty good to-day, Mrs. Ellis tells us," said Nan brightly.

"Oh, very much better," was the reply. "I ought to when I have so many kind friends."

Just then the nurse came in, bringing the delicacies that the girls had purchased.

"See what these friends have brought you," she said, as she lifted the things one by one from the basket and placed them on a table by the side of the bed.

Mrs. Bragley's eyes grew wet with sudden tears.

"You are too good to me, young ladies! What kind hearts there are in the world!"

The oranges especially seemed to please her, and Mrs. Ellis prepared one for her.

"How good that orange tastes," she remarked. "I've always been very fond of them. At one time I thought I'd be owning a whole grove of them. But that was just a dream."

"What do you mean?" Rhoda asked, with interest.

"Well, dearie," answered the woman, evidently pleased with Rhoda's interest, "some years ago my husband thought he saw his way to make a little fortune for us. He heard of a company in Florida that was developing orange lands, and it looked so good to him that he bought a share in it. He thought he was going to make money enough out of it to make us safe for life. But nothing ever came of it."

"Where was this land?" asked Nan.

"Let me see," mused Mrs. Bragley, wrinkling her brow with the effort to remember. "It was somewhere in Florida, but I can't remember the name. It was—it was—I can't just think. Not that it matters much, anyhow, but I hate to forget things that way. Sun-sun-Sunny Slopes. That's what the name was."

"What a pretty name!" cried Bess.

"Yes. But that's about all that was pretty about it," replied Mrs. Bragley, with a weak smile. "My

husband invested almost all his savings in it because he thought it was going to make him rich."

"When was that?" asked Nan, who was growing deeply interested.

"Only a short time before his death," came the answer sadly.

"But haven't you heard anything about it since?" queried Bess wonderingly. "You may really be rich, for all you know."

Mrs. Bragley smiled wanly.

"Not much chance of that, I fear," she replied. "I have written again and again, but have never received any answer to my letters. I'm afraid it was all a swindle."

"You must have papers of some kind," observed Nan.

"Yes," the woman assented. "They're in that bottom drawer there, if you'll trouble to get them for me."

Nan opened the drawer indicated and took from it a packet of papers. The documents bore marks of frequent folding and unfolding.

"May I look at them?" Nan asked, as she brought them to the bedside.

"Surely," was the ready answer. "And if one of you will just hand me my specs, I'll look over them with you and tell you all about them."

The three girls bent eagerly over Mrs. Bragley as she opened one paper after the other, prospectuses,

several of them, highly colored illustrated leaflets and descriptive circulars. Then came a certificate for forty shares in the Sunny Slopes Development Company. The only individual name on any of the papers seemed to be that of Jacob Pacomb, who, it appeared, was the manager and the developer of the tract.

"It's extremely strange that no answer ever came to any of your letters," remarked Rhoda, as she scanned the documents. "Did any of the letters ever come back?"

"Not one," was the reply.

"Perhaps the man did not receive them," conjectured Nan.

"In that case," Mrs. Bragley replied, "the letters would have been returned to me, as I put my name and address on the outside."

"This man, Pacomb," suggested Bess, "may have died and all of the letters may have been destroyed."

"That wouldn't be very likely," objected Nan. "Some one would probably have settled up the business or taken it over and kept on with it. In either case, the letters would almost surely have been answered."

"I have thought of all that," the woman replied; "and that is why I think it must have been all a fraud. If I had been able to spare the money I would have taken a trip to Florida and looked into

The three girls bent eagerly over Mrs. Bragley as she opened one paper after another. (*See page 65*)

the matter myself, but I never felt that I could afford it."

"It is too bad you couldn't have gone," said Rhoda thoughtfully; "for if there was fraud you would then at least have found it out and could have had somebody punished. It looks to me that, knowing you were a widow and without means to look into things, they have deliberately held back any money that might have been coming to you and cheated you out of your rights."

The girls had been so interested in the papers and the story that went with them that they had thought of nothing else. Now Nan, suddenly glancing up, noticed that the old face looked white and tired. She rose at once.

"I'm afraid we've stayed too long," she said penitently. "We ought to have remembered that Mrs. Bragley isn't strong."

She replaced the papers in the drawer, smoothed the bed covers, and gave the injured woman a comforting pat on the shoulders.

"I hope you will be well again very soon," she said, "and then perhaps some way will be found to look into this matter."

"Anyway, we're going to try to do something about it," promised Rhoda as they took their leave.

The girls found when they got outside that it had begun to snow.

"Looks to me as if we were in for another storm," was Rhoda's comment, as they trudged along.

"Who cares?" cried Bess, catching up a handful of the snow and making a snowball.

"You can't hit anything," scoffed Nan. "Try it."

"All right, here goes for the blacksmith shop," answered Bess gaily, for they were almost directly in front of the little smithy.

"Gracious! Going to try to hit the whole building?" queried the girl from Rose Ranch.

"A blind man could do that," added Nan.

"I'm going to hit the door—the very middle of the door," answered Bess.

"Oh, Bess! if the man is inside, what will he think?" said Nan.

"I don't care what he thinks," was the quick reply. "Here goes!"

Away flew the snowball, and it must be admitted that Bess's aim was decidedly good, for the snowball sailed directly for the center of the door of the smithy.

But as the girl launched the snowball the door of the blacksmith shop opened and a man came forth.

Spat! the snowball landed directly in the man's face!

CHAPTER X

A MIDNIGHT FEAST

"My gracious, Bess, see what you have done!" cried Nan.

"You certainly hit the bull's eye that time," was Rhoda's comment.

"Oh!" was the only word Bess could utter, and she stood there in the roadway, her arm still poised high in the air as when she had thrown the snowball.

"Hi, you! Wot yer mean by heavin' snowballs at me?" screamed the man, as he wiped the snow from his face. "You let me alone! I ain't done no harm, I ain't."

He waved his hands wildly in the air. The girls now noticed that he was in tatters and had a very red nose, doubtless made redder than ever by the snowball.

"Come, move on now," said a voice from the smithy, and a tall man wearing a leather apron appeared. "I told you before I'd not have you hanging around here. Git!"

"I ain't gonner be snowballed!" cried the tramp,

for such he was. "Tain't fair. I'm an honest man, I am. You lemme alone."

"I'll do worse than snowball you if you don't clear out, and that mighty quick," cried the blacksmith. "I know what you came in this place for—you came to steal horseshoes and then sell 'em over to Beavertown."

"I didn't—I came in to git warm," sniveled the tramp. But then, as the blacksmith reached for a whip, he fairly ran down the snowy road and out of sight.

"Wasn't I lucky?" said Bess, when the girls had explained matters to the blacksmith and moved on once more in the direction of the hall. "Only a tramp, and it might have been the blacksmith himself!"

"Well, we admit your aim was good," answered Nan drily.

As they made their way back to the school the girls talked over the matter of Mrs. Bragley's property. They came across Grace in the hall, and, bearing her off to Nan's room, told her the story of Sunny Slopes.

"Why!" exclaimed Grace, as a thought suddenly struck her, "I'll have dad look that up while we're down at Palm Beach. You know he's a lawyer. Maybe Sunny Slopes isn't far from where we'll be staying. I'll get him to see what he can do."

"That will be perfectly darling!" exclaimed Nan

enthusiastically, and the others heartily agreed with her.

The next day, while returning from town where they had been stocking up for the feast they had promised themselves, they again met Walter Mason.

"Hello, girls," he called, as he came up to them.

"Hello, Palm Beach," returned Laura.

"So you've heard about it, have you?" Walter responded, with a laugh.

"Have we?" replied Nan. "We haven't heard or talked or thought of anything else since Grace told us."

"Of course you're going along?" said Bess questioningly.

"Of course," Walter answered. "But, to tell the truth, I'm not a bit eager to go. I'd rather stay right here."

They chatted a few minutes longer, and then Walter left them and the girls resumed their walk toward the school.

"Why do you suppose Walter would rather stay here than go to Palm Beach?" Laura asked innocently of no one in particular.

"That isn't hard to guess," replied Bess, with a mischievous glance at Nan. "What do you think about it, Nan?"

"I haven't any opinion," answered Nan demurely. "What I do know, though, is that we'll have to hurry if we get back to the school before dark."

That night had been set for the "spread," and the girls went early to their rooms to get their lessons for the next day out of the way. A most unusual and unnatural silence reigned in Nan's room for nearly two hours. It was broken by a book snapping shut as Bess sprang to her feet, exclaiming with satisfaction:

"There, that's done! And it's the last, thank fortune."

"Same here," answered Nan happily, as she gathered books and paper together and tossed them into a far corner of the room.

"Why, Nan!" exclaimed Bess in surprise, glancing at the clock, "where do you suppose the girls are? They were to be on hand at ten o'clock, and it's now five minutes after."

"Lessons," replied Nan laconically. "They'll be here any second now."

As she spoke the door opened softly, and Laura slipped in with a bundle of things in her arms. Placing them on the table, she went back and softly closed the door.

"Do you know, girls," she said in a low tone, "I met Linda Riggs as I was coming through the hall, and her eyes were two big bundles of curiosity when she saw the things in my arms. I shouldn't be surprised——"

Suddenly, without waiting to finish the sentence, she went back to the door, opened it quickly and

stepped out into the hall to see Linda, looking red and confused, walking hurriedly away.

Laura called after her.

"Was there anything you wanted, Linda?" she inquired sweetly.

"No, thank you," came the pert rejoinder. "Not now. Later, perhaps."

Laura returned.

"Of all the mean, sneaking——" she began, but Nan laughingly interrupted.

"There, there, Laura, what's the use? Don't give her a second thought."

"She isn't worth it, that's a fact," Laura contented herself with saying, and the next minute the entrance of the other girls laden with parcels put anything else out of her mind.

Rhoda's box, much to the girl's uneasiness, had been delayed, but had come that night just before dinner. Now she deposited it unopened on a chair.

"I thought it would be fun to open it here and see what blessings it had in store for us," she explained, as she proceeded to open and unpack it.

"Blessings!" echoed Nan. "Well, I should say they were," she added, as, one after another, a big layer cake, a small fruit cake, some cakes prettily iced, bottles of choice olives, salted almonds and peanuts, jars of jelly and marmalade, fruit, and a big package of fresh assorted bonbons were drawn from the box.

"Oh, for pity's sake, girls, let's hurry and get at them," cried Laura. "My mouth's fairly watering for them."

As she spoke, she drew Nan's spirit lamp from its shelf and soon had the water for cocoa boiling in a small saucepan.

"Why in the world," said Grace as she set the plates and cups and saucers on the table, "did we go and buy all these things? If we'd only known what that box was going to hold we wouldn't have needed half of them."

"No matter, the sandwiches and ice cream will come in well," said Laura. "That is," she added, "if there's anything of the ice cream left. I put it outside the minute we got it here, but it's had a long time to wait."

"It won't have to wait much longer," exulted Bess, as the girls gathered around the table and the feast began.

"Hey! don't let Grace cut that fruit cake yet," said Nan, her mouth full of cream cheese sandwich. "There won't be a raisin left for the rest of us."

"If you eat many more sandwiches," laughed Grace, "you won't have room left for even a raisin." And she calmly proceeded not only to cut the cake, but to help herself to a very generous slice.

"Um-um—this is good," she said. "Fruit cake is my special weakness."

"Yes, and it's our duty to help you conquer that weakness," remarked Laura virtuously, as she drew the fruit cake over to her side of the table.

"Now where did I put that sugar bowl?" asked Bess, as she finished pouring her third cup of cocoa.

"Here it is," replied Rhoda, as she accommodatingly handed over a small glass bowl from which Bess helped herself to a generous double spoonful. One swallow of her cocoa, and she began to sputter and gasp, and finally made a frantic grab for a tumbler of water.

"What on earth is the matter with the child?" asked Laura.

"Salt," Bess managed to articulate. "You gave me the salt, Rhoda, instead of the sugar. Oh, what a dose!"

The girls wanted to shout with laughter, but caution made them smother it as much as possible. And just at this juncture, the door opened part way without even one little warning squeak, and a severe voice said:

"Young ladies, report to me at my office at noon to-morrow."

CHAPTER XI

A DANGEROUS PLOT

THE girls, their laughter quenched, gazed at each other for a few seconds with stupefaction. Then Nan sprang to the door, opened it, and caught sight of a silently scurrying figure that could not by any means be confounded with Mrs. Cupp's angular form or slow, measured movements.

The other girls, astonished, gazed at Nan open-mouthed as she re-entered the room with flushed and indignant face and uttered the one enlightening word:

"Linda."

"It sure was!"

"Of all the nerve!" began Laura slowly.

"Of all the meanness, I should say," amended Rhoda indignantly, as she turned the key in the door.

Then the funny side struck them, and they sat doubled up with suppressed laughter.

With increased hilarity the feast went on. The ice cream was brought in and found to be in a very creditable state of preservation, and the layer cake

and small iced cakes were very soon being gobbled up.

To illustrate that "variety is the spice of life," so she said, Laura had just followed some ice cream with a sour pickle, when a footstep neared the door and a stern voice commanded them to open it.

"Linda," whispered Grace to Bess, who was nearest her, while Laura said in a perfectly audible though subdued voice:

"You can just go about your business, you essence of meanness."

"You needn't think you can work that trick on us twice," added Grace.

"Don't judge our intellects by your own," scoffed Rhoda. "You must think we were born yesterday."

The girls laughed at the sally, and silence ensued for a moment.

"I guess that has disposed of Linda for the rest of the night," exulted Laura, and she applied herself again to the now rapidly melting ice cream.

"Let's finish this cream while the eating's good," laughed Nan, when her spoon was arrested on its way to her mouth by a voice outside the door.

"Nan Sherwood, I command you to open this door."

In overwhelming consternation the girls rose to their feet, and Nan unlocked and opened the door.

Quivering with anger and outraged dignity, Mrs. Cupp swept the room with flashing eyes.

"You will go to your rooms, young ladies, and you will all report at Dr. Prescott's room to-morrow morning at ten o'clock," she decreed, and, turning, moved majestically down the corridor, leaving black consternation behind her.

"Now, we are in for it!" gasped Rhoda, as the sound of footsteps died away.

Too overwhelmed to say another word, the others slipped away to their rooms.

The next morning, with many inward quakings, they entered the principal's room. Dr. Prescott's voice was severe as she said to the five caught-in-the-act delinquents:

"You are ready to admit, I presume, that you have broken one of the rules of the school. That I can understand. But that you should have been guilty of disrespect to one of the officers of the school is quite another and more serious thing. Have you any explanation to offer?"

After a moment's silence, Nan acted as spokesman.

"We did not intend to be disrespectful to Mrs. Cupp," she declared, and then went on and told the whole story.

"That puts things in a better light," said Dr. Prescott, when Nan had finished. "But to make you more careful in future and to remind you that the rules of Lakeview Hall are made to be observed, not ignored, I will forbid you all to go outside the

grounds for three full days. You can go now to your recitations."

The girls bowed and withdrew, and for the rest of the morning they were unusually quiet. At noon they gathered in Laura's room, dropped into the nearest chairs at hand, and looked at each other lugubriously.

"Three days without poking our noses outside the gates!" mourned Bess. "How are we ever going to stand it?"

"I don't care much for that," commented Rhoda. "But I hate to give that Linda Riggs anything to gloat over."

"And she will," declared Grace. "She'll make the very most of it, you can be sure."

"She will."

"Oh, well, let her then," said Laura, recovering something of her usual spirits. "Say, girls, did you see the expression on Cupp's face when we opened the door?"

They burst into a merry laugh at the remembrance, and the laugh lessened the tension and did them good.

"Oh!" gasped Laura, as she wiped the tears from her eyes, "I shall remember that look when I'm an old woman."

"I suspect Cupp will remember the occasion, too, for many days to come," prophesied Nan.

"I wish there had been a glass opposite the door,

so that she could have seen her face," remarked Bess, going off into another gale of laughter.

"Come on," said Rhoda, when they had settled down. "Let's go for a walk on the campus and get some fresh air. Thank goodness, we can do that, anyway."

"Oh, dear," sighed Nan, as they went downstairs. "No coasting, no skating for three days. What a fate!"

"No matter," comforted Grace. "The feast was worth it. The memory lingers."

"It does," agreed Laura. "I can taste that layer cake yet. But come, girls, I challenge you to a race around the campus. One, two, three—go!"

"Wait until I make certain my shoe is tight," cried Grace.

"And wait until I get my cap fastened on," added Nan.

"No primping now!" exclaimed Laura. "Everybody ready?"

"What's the prize?" questioned Bess. "I can't run well unless I know it's worth it."

"You get the hole out of a doughnut," said Nan. "All sugared over, too."

"And a glass of frozen ice-water," added Grace.

"This is all the way around the campus," went on Laura. "No cutting corners, remember. You must follow the trees and the hedge. One cent fine if you don't. All ready? One—two—three, go!"

With wild shouts and much laughter the race around the campus was on.

Nan won "by a nose," as Laura rather slangily put it, and the girls, glowing and breathless, looked like anything else than confessed law-breakers doing penance.

The sight of their happy faces was too much for Linda, who, with Cora, was passing them, drawing the *Gay Girl* and carrying their skates over their shoulders.

"Some people try mighty hard to show that they're having a good time," she remarked to her companion.

"Blessings brighten as they take their flight, as the girl said when she couldn't leave the campus," grinned Cora maliciously.

"Well," countered Nan, "at least we're not doing penance for sneaking in the dark and listening at doors."

The flush on Linda's face showed that the shot had reached the mark.

"You think you know a lot, don't you?" she mocked, as she and Cora went on.

"How I detest that Nan Sherwood," hissed Linda. "I'll get square with her some day, and that day isn't so far off either. I know just how I'm going to fix her."

"Why do you keep on being so mysterious?" asked Cora impatiently. "You're always hinting and get-

ting my curiosity aroused and then stopping short. Go on and tell me now."

But Linda refused, saying that she wanted to be sure first that her plans would go through all right.

"When I do spring things," she said, "I'll square up all accounts."

Cora sulked, but had to submit.

Several days later, as Nan and Bess were studying in their room, Bess wrote the final word in a French translation with a sigh of relief.

"Didn't you say once, Nan," she queried, "that you had somewhere a book of model French conversations?"

"Yes," answered Nan, looking up from her work. "Do you want it?"

"I'd like it ever so much," Bess answered. "I think it would help me with these wretched idioms that puzzle me so. Could you get it for me?"

"Surely, Bess," assented Nan, with obliging readiness. "It's down in my trunk. I'll go right down to the basement to-morrow after we finish our English recitation at twelve o'clock and get it for you."

"That's a darling, Nan," returned Bess gratefully. "I know it will help me heaps."

During this conversation their door had been standing open, and Linda Riggs, who was passing (she made occasion often to pass Nan's door), heard every word. An exultant look came into her face, and she hurried off to find Cora. She told her eag-

erly that at last she knew just how and when she was going to get even with that much-hated Nan Sherwood.

"What are you going to do?" asked Cora, excited and yet a little fearful of any scheme that Linda might hatch.

"I'm going to give her the scare of her life," replied Linda. "The idea came to me the other day when I was in the trunk room in the basement. The steam started to blow off with such a whistle close to my ears that it made me almost jump out of my skin. I feel sure that if the steam can only be held down for a little while and then go off with a rush it will be ten times louder. If that could be made to happen just as Sherwood was going past, it would scare her out of a year's growth. She'd think her last hour had come. The trouble has been that I never knew just when she'd be there. But I know now. I just heard her say. She's in for the biggest fright of her life. How does it strike you?"

"It sounds all right," answered Cora slowly. "But how are you going to do it?"

"Easily," said Linda, with a confident ring in her voice. "After the janitor has fixed up the fires for the day to-morrow morning he'll not be in the basement. I'll slip down before Sherwood is due to get there and tie down the valve. That'll keep the steam confined and make the shriek that much louder when it's let loose. I'll hide behind the woodpile, and just

when Sherwood is opposite the furnace, I'll cut the string and—*voila.*"

"All very fine," remarked Cora half-heartedly. "But isn't it awfully dangerous? Have you thought what might happen if you confine the steam?"

"Of course I've thought of that, stupid," replied Linda, nettled at Cora's lack of enthusiasm. "But the steam won't be held back long enough to do any harm."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Cora, who felt very uneasy about the possible results of her friend's malicious scheme.

"Nonsense," retorted Linda. "I'll take all the risk, if there is any. But there won't be. I've planned it out too carefully to make any mistake about it. It's too good a chance to get even with Nan Sherwood to let it go by."

CHAPTER XII

ALMOST A DISASTER

"I WOULDN'T risk it if I were you, Linda," Cora persisted.

"Oh, what's the use of talking to you!" exclaimed Linda angrily. "You haven't got enough sense to understand. I wish I hadn't told you a word about it," and she turned her back upon her chum and refused to say another word.

Cora, daring for once to be angry in her turn, left the room, and Linda soon forgot her in gloating over the fright she was plotting for Nan.

The next morning after the eleven o'clock recitation had begun, Linda made a pretext for leaving the room. She slipped down into the basement and then came back to her seat to await developments.

Meanwhile, the well-ordered routine of Lakeview Hall was proceeding as usual. The hands of the great clock in the English recitation room pointed to a quarter of twelve, and sidelong looks were being cast at it in pleasurable anticipation of the noon hour.

Bang!

Suddenly the crash of a loud explosion filled every one with terror. The building trembled to its foundations. Clouds of steam poured up from the basement.

A wild cry rent the air.

"What's that?"

"Sounded like an explosion to me."

"Maybe it's an earthquake."

"Oh, see the smoke."

"The school must be on fire!"

"I'm going to get out of here!"

"Oh, yes, let me out; I don't want to be burnt alive!"

"Fire! Fire! The Hall is on fire!"

In an instant a panic was on. The teachers alone and some of the older girls kept their heads. The younger pupils rushed for the doors in a frenzy of fright.

The English teacher ran to one of the doors of her recitation room and held it fast. But there was another door in the room, and toward this the frightened girls poured in a mad stampede. Just outside was the stairway with several sharp turns, and if the fugitives jammed up on one of the landings it might mean maiming or death for some of them.

Quick as a flash, Nan Sherwood acted. She sprang to the danger door, slammed it shut and put her back against it. The tide surged up against her. The younger girls clawed at her, scratched her

hands, did all in their power to force her away from the door. But she held her place with desperation, though her clothes were torn and her hands were bleeding.

Then through the crowd came Linda Riggs, bowling the smaller girls out of her way, her face as pale as death and her eyes almost bulging out of her head with fright.

"Let me get out, Nan Sherwood!" she screamed, tearing at her with all her might. "Let me out! Let me out! I'll die! I won't stay here to be burned to death! Get away from that door! Let me get out!"

She tore at Nan and struck her in the face. She was a strong girl, and doubly strong now in her rage and fright. But Nan braced herself and still held the door, though her strength was fast ebbing.

Just then help came. Rhoda Hammond and Bess Harley caught hold of Linda and pulled her away. They thrust her into a seat and held her down, while Laura and others of the older girls pacified and soothed the younger ones.

The worst was over. The steam had thinned out and drifted away. The pupils slowly went back to their seats at the command of the teacher and sat there, sobbing and moaning and weak from excitement. But the panic had been quelled.

Now that the crisis had passed, Nan felt her strength leaving her, and she had scarcely enough

left to get back to her seat. She almost fell into it when at last she reached it.

Just then, Dr. Prescott, who from the moment of the first alarm had been in other parts of the building, helping to quell the excitement, entered the room. She took her stand beside the teacher and held with her a brief conversation in which she learned what had occurred in the room. Then she spoke a few quiet words of assurance, telling the girls that there had not been, and was not now, any danger and warmly commending the bravery and self-control of the teacher and the older girls. She then dismissed them.

A refreshing half-hour in their rooms did the girls a world of good, and when the lunch gong sounded they gathered about the table in something like their normal spirits. It is true that none ate very much, but tongues flew fast in comment and conjecture.

"How could it have happened?" was the many-times-repeated question. Was it the janitor's fault? He must have forgotten to turn off the drafts perhaps, and the accumulated gas had exploded.

"Probably something was wrong with the safety valve," conjectured Rhoda, building better than she knew.

"Well," said Nan, as at last they rose from the table, "I hope they'll find out what did cause it so that it will never happen again."

Naturally, there were no more lessons that afternoon. The girls gathered in groups in the corridors or in each others' rooms excitedly discussing the stirring events of the morning.

Nan lay upon the couch in her room, resting after her exertions, when Grace, who had been telephoning to Walter, came in bursting with news.

"What do you think I heard downstairs!" she cried before she was fairly in the room. "Doctor Beulah thinks that it wasn't an accident at all, but that the whole thing was caused by some one tampering with the boiler."

The girls all spoke at once.

"Oh, that couldn't be!"

"Who'd have any object in doing a thing that might have cost lives?"

"Isn't it awful!"

"Anyway," Grace went on as soon as they gave her a chance to speak, "they say that a heavy cord had been tied to the valve to keep it down and the broken ends of the cord were found hanging from it."

The girls were stupefied with astonishment.

Suddenly Laura started up and walked excitedly about the room.

"There's this much about it!" she exclaimed. "If some one did do it purposely, Doctor Beulah will soon find out when it was done, and why it was done—*and who did it, too,*" she added significantly.

Laura knew by the expression on all the faces

that the same thought that had been in her mind when she spoke those last words was in the minds of the other girls, too.

If two very depressed and frightened girls in another room could have heard them, their spirits would have sunk still lower.

"What did I tell you!" cried Cora wildly. "I begged you not to do it. And what did you make by it? Disgraced yourself and only made Nan Sherwood more popular than ever."

For once, Linda was silent. Cora made the most of her chance to get back at Linda for her high-handed treatment of her. She went on mercilessly:

"I was so ashamed of you," she said. "You made such a show of yourself. I didn't think you could be such a coward."

"Well," whined Linda, "I had more to live for, with all my money, than they had."

"That sounds like you," gibed Cora disgustedly. "Well, I pity you if Doctor Beulah finds out you did it. And she will, you can just depend on that."

In the meantime Bess, with some other girls, visited the basement to look at the wreckage. When she came back she had a queer look on her face. She called Nan to one side.

"See what I found," she said and held out a small handkerchief with a daisy worked in one corner. "It was in the basement, close to the wrecked boiler."

Nan looked at the bit of linen and started. She

remembered having seen Linda Riggs with such a handkerchief more than once.

"But Linda may have dropped it down there since the explosion," she said, quickly.

"I guess not!" drawled Bess. "This looks like a bit of real evidence to me."

"Oh, Bess—don't say anything—at least not till you are sure."

"I won't. But I'll remember it."

At this moment the gong sounded a summons to the main assembly hall, a summons which the girls obeyed with alacrity.

Knowing as they did that an examination of the steam plant had been going on, and their interest and curiosity quickened by the rumors they had heard, it was not long before every seat was filled and all eyes turned expectantly on Dr. Prescott. She sat there, rather pale, but dignified and well poised.

"What is she going to say?" each girl asked herself. The tension was at its height, the silence could almost be felt, when Dr. Prescott began to speak.

"A thorough examination has shown us," she began, "that the steam plant is very badly damaged, though we hope that it may be possible to repair it in a short time. But the investigation," she went on, "has revealed the almost unbelievable fact that there was no accident, but a deliberate plan or trick. Who conceived it or why, is not yet known, but we

will spare no effort to find the guilty party and bring him or her to punishment. I am very thankful that the injury was confined to the steam plant and that no one was hurt, as might easily have been the case.

"I am very proud of the presence of mind and bravery shown by the teachers and many of the students. Many of the younger girls and all the older ones, with one shameful exception"—she paused, and all eyes were turned on Linda, who sat cowering in her seat—"showed remarkable self-possession, and I take this opportunity to thank them all. I hesitate to mention any names, but I must single out Nan Sherwood, who, by her prompt action and cool courage, contributed in so large a measure to avert the dreadful consequences of a panic."

With these words she dismissed them.

As the girls left the assembly hall they broke out into a Babel of excited comment. Dr. Prescott, crossing the hall on the way to her office, placed her arm over Nan's shoulders and thanked her personally. Nan's heart swelled at the earnest words of praise, for Dr. Prescott's good opinion was highly valued.

"Of course," the doctor added with a whimsical smile, "the three-day sentence is remitted for you and your friends."

She passed on.

"Isn't she just splendid!" exclaimed Grace.

"And how nicely she seemed to manage the whole situation," remarked Rhoda.

"She's a peach!" declared Laura, slangily.

"I should say she is! And so is somebody else I know," agreed Bess, as she drew Nan's arm through hers.

CHAPTER XIII

THE WILY STRANGER

"WHAT *is* this anyway?" asked Bess. "Greenland or the North Pole?"

"Well, it's Siberia at the very least," laughed Nan, as, wrapped in outdoor coats and furs, the girls entered the recitation room the second morning after the explosion.

School without heat in weather that came close to the zero mark was not very enticing, and it was glad news to all the girls when it was announced that, owing to the injury to the steam plant, which was greater than was at first thought, the school term would end nearly a week ahead of time pending extensive repairs. Those who were going home were directed to begin to pack at once, and those who were not would be provided with quarters in the village.

After hearing this announcement the girls flew upstairs on winged feet.

"An extra week at home! What happiness!" exclaimed Bess, whirling Nan around until they both dropped breathless on the window seat.

"And think of Grace with another week at Palm Beach to look forward to!" cried Nan.

"What luck for her!" said Bess enviously, as she began taking her things from the dresser drawer.

Soon the last trunk was locked and strapped and they were ready to depart.

"Let's run to town for a last visit to Mrs. Bragley," proposed Nan.

Bess gladly acquiesced, and the two girls were off. They were delighted to find Mrs. Bragley sitting up and able to get around a little with a cane. She greeted them gratefully and was profuse in her thanks for all the care they had shown her. And she was intensely interested in their story of the explosion at the school.

"And now," said Nan, after they had chatted for a while, "how about those papers? We are going home sooner than we thought, and if you will give them to me I will show them to Grace Mason's father. He is a very able lawyer and will get to the bottom of this orange grove if any one can."

"That will be fine," was the gratified reply. "The papers are right here. I have been looking them over. Take them if you wish, dear."

Mrs. Bragley took them from the table and handed them to Nan, and the latter tucked them safely away in her bag.

"I may be carrying a fortune away in this bag,"

she said jokingly, as she snapped the catch and rose to go.

"I'm afraid they're not worth the paper they're printed on," said the woman dubiously.

"Hope on, hope ever," quoted Bess gaily, as, with a last wave of the hand, she followed Nan out of the door.

They were almost to the school when Bess suddenly asked:

"Do you know that man, Nan? He looks as though he were going to speak to us."

Nan looked up just as a tall thin man approached them. He lifted his hat and said:

"I beg pardon, young ladies, but could you inform me where the Widow Bragley lives?"

Nan pointed out the cottage and the man thanked her and passed on.

"What a peculiar way he had of talking," said Bess, as they resumed their walk.

"I noticed that he talked like a Southerner," replied Nan. "I wonder what business he can have with Mrs. Bragley."

"Hard to tell," said Bess. "I only hope it isn't a bill collector to bother the poor thing." And then the schoolgirls passed on their way.

The stranger soon reached the cottage of Mrs. Bragley. He scanned it carefully and noted its poverty. A contented smile stole over his face as he said to himself:

"I imagine there won't be any trouble in getting what I came for. A little money here will go a long way."

He knocked on the door and Mrs. Ellis opened it.

"Does Mrs. Sarah Bragley live here?" the stranger inquired with an ingratiating smile, which, however, sat rather badly on his somewhat sinister countenance.

"Yes," replied Mrs. Ellis. "But she's not very well and has gone to lie down. Is it anything I can do for you?"

"No, thank you," replied the stranger. "My errand with her is a personal one. I've come all the way from the South to see her on a matter of private business."

"If that's the case, I think she'll see you," replied the nurse, ushering him in and giving him a seat.

She excused herself and went into the bedroom, and in a few minutes Mrs. Bragley appeared, a little curious and considerably flustered by the announcement of a visitor from such a distance.

"My name is Thompson," the visitor said, as he rose and bowed. "I came from Florida to see you on a business matter. I'm sorry to learn that you are not well, and I'd put the matter off, only that I have arrangements made to get back home as soon as possible."

"From Florida?" repeated the old woman. "It can't be that you've come to see me about that orange

grove property there that my husband put all our money into before he died?"

"If you refer to the property at Sunny Slopes," returned the visitor, "you are right. It is just that that I came to see you about."

"Laws me!" ejaculated the widow in some excitement. "And here it was only a little while ago I was saying that I never expected to hear from it. I wrote and wrote and never heard a word from it. I began to think," she went on a little apologetically, "that there might be some fraud or something of that kind about it."

"Oh, nothing like that," the visitor said impressively. "Mr. Pacomb is the soul of honor. I have never known him to do anything that wasn't straight and aboveboard."

"I'm very glad to hear that," said the simple-hearted old woman. "He wrote such beautiful letters to us when he was asking us to put our money into the property that I thought he must be a nice man. I'm very sorry that I ever had an unkind thought about him. I'm so glad to know that things are all right. I need the money so badly. And my poor husband always thought there would be a whole lot of money come from it."

The stranger looked a little embarrassed.

"Quite right, quite right," he said. "There ought to have been a big profit from it. Everybody thought so, and nobody felt more sure of it than

Mr. Pacomb himself. He thought so well of it that he put every cent of his own money into it."

"Then he's made a fortune in it, too!" exclaimed the old woman, beaming on her visitor.

The stranger coughed.

"No," he said, "that's the unfortunate thing about it. You see, Mrs. Bragley, the thing didn't turn out as we had hoped and expected. The land was right in the orange belt, and we had every reason to believe that it would yield big results. But for some reason or other it didn't. The ground couldn't have been adapted to it. You never can tell about orange groves."

The poor woman's face fell.

"Then," she said quaveringly, "all my money is gone!"

"Oh, no, not all," the stranger hastened to say. "There is still a little money for you, if you want to sell what interest you have in the property. Of course the property has proved practically worthless. But the man who has a country estate bordering on the property is willing to pay the company a small sum just to round out his estate, and your interest in it we calculate would be about two hundred dollars. In fact," he went on with a burst of generosity, and at the same time taking a roll of bills from his pocket, "Mr. Pacomb would be willing to give you two hundred dollars to settle the matter up at once."

He began to count out the bills, as if the matter had been agreed upon. It was a long time since Mrs. Bragley had seen so much money, and in her straightened circumstances two hundred dollars seemed like a fortune. The visitor had counted on the influence exerted by the sight of the money, and he was not disappointed.

"Well," said Mrs. Bragley, "I suppose it's the best thing I can do, since you say that the land isn't any good for oranges."

"We'll consider it settled then," the man observed, trying to conceal his satisfaction. "Now if you'll get me the papers I'll hand you the money."

A look of dismay came into the woman's face.

"The—the papers!" she stammered. "Why, I haven't got them!"

"You haven't got them?" the man snapped in wonder. "Where are they then?"

"I gave them to a young lady not more than an hour ago," replied Mrs. Bragley. "She had just gone a little before you came."

"Why did you give them to her?" the man asked.

"Some friends of hers are going to Florida and they were going to look up the matter," replied the old lady. "It seems that the father of one of the girls is a lawyer and——"

"A lawyer!" interrupted the man, a look of fear coming into his face. Then by a great effort he regained his self-control.

"Well, Mrs. Bragley," he said, "it's for you to do what you choose in this matter. It's too bad for you to lose this two hundred dollars when you might just as well have it as not. Suppose I see this young lady and tell her that you want the papers back."

"I wish you would," replied the old lady. Then she gave the man Nan's name and told him where she thought he could find her. He scribbled the name and address in a notebook, and a little later hurried away.

"If I don't find that Nan Sherwood and get the papers away from her my name isn't Jacob Pacomb," he muttered to himself.

With all speed he hurried to the Hall, only to learn that Nan had left for the depot. Then he rushed to the station.

"Sorry, but the train left quarter of an hour ago," declared the station master in reply to his question. "There won't be another train for three hours."

On gaining this information the face of Jacob Pacomb became a study. Savagely he bit off the end of a cigar, lit it, and began to puff away furiously.

"That young woman from the school may be a sharp one," he murmured as he strode up and down the little depot platform. "I'll have to use either force or diplomacy in getting those papers from her. I mustn't let her think they are valuable. I wonder what I can do next? It's too bad I promised to go to Chicago to attend that sale. But I can't

afford to miss that." He mused for a moment. "Wonder if I couldn't get Davis and Jensen to do this job for me? They are hanging around doing nothing and would do almost anything for the price of a meal. Yes, I'll see Davis and Jensen and set them on the girl's track."

In the meantime Nan and Bess were being whirled at the rate of fifty miles an hour toward the home where love and open arms awaited them.

Their parents had, of course, been apprised of their coming, and the welcome was the royal one that always greeted them after their long absences from home. Nothing was too good for them.

Several days passed quickly, and then came great news. The first item was a notification from Dr. Prescott that since the steam plant had required far more extensive repairs than at first had seemed necessary, the reopening would be deferred for several weeks beyond the usual time. And following this closely came a letter to each of the girls from Grace Mason. They *must* go with her to Palm Beach. The "must" was underscored. She would take no denial. They would have such a perfectly gorgeous time if they could only come along. Please, please, *please!* They simply *must,* and that was all there was about it.

Nan and Bess were filled with delight and excitement. But they had to reckon with their parents, who were reluctant to spare their girls after hav-

ing them with them for so short a time. But the girls coaxed and wheedled, as girls will, and the parents finally yielded, as parents will. In the next few days the matter was settled and hurried preparations were begun.

More than once they had to pinch themselves to make sure they were not dreaming. Palm Beach! Land of summer, land of flowers, land of beauty! And they—Nan Sherwood and Bess Harley—were actually going to dwell for a time in that earthly Paradise!

CHAPTER XIV

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

NAN was really going to Palm Beach! She could scarcely realize her good fortune.

Grace had written that some cousins who were to go had disappointed them, so good accommodations were assured to Nan and Bess when they reached Palm Beach.

Nan was up in her bedroom in the evening looking dreamily out of the window and imagining she was already at the famous winter resort when she gave a start.

Two men were slinking around, behind some trees on the opposite side of the street! From time to time they gazed at the house as if looking for somebody.

"The same men! What can it mean?"

Nan breathed the words to herself. She had seen these men before since coming home from school. They had leered at her when on an errand to the drugstore, and one of them had acted as if he wanted to speak to her while she was at the depot asking for a timetable. But a man friend had come

up to greet her and the stranger had slunk away.

Nan's first impulse was to call her father and mother. But then she hesitated. Why worry her parents, and especially her mother, when, after all, it might mean little or nothing?

She looked again. Some men had come up the street. At sight of them the two slinking ones shrank back and presently hurried away.

"I hope I never see them again," said the girl to herself. But this wish was not to be gratified.

Yet the next day Nan gave the strange men hardly a thought. There were so many things to be done in preparation for the great trip.

"It's not like going out to Rose Ranch, where any old thing was good enough to wear," Nan confided to Bess. "We've got to look our best, on Grace's account as well as our own."

"And Walter's," added Bess, and then Nan promptly threw a book at her chum.

A day more, and then came the all-important time for departure.

"Oh, just to think of it! We are really and truly going!"

Nan was seated on an overturned suitcase on the porch of the little "dwelling in amity." Her hands were clasped tightly in front of her to keep her from jumping up and running off madly somewhere, anywhere—just to relieve her tremendous excitement.

Never in her life had it seemed so hard to keep still. Her trunk had gone to the station, her bag was packed, and everything was ready to catch the ten-o'clock train for New York. From there she and Bess were to take the boat, which was to carry them swiftly down the coast to Jacksonville, the gateway to Florida.

Everything was in readiness that is save Momsey. All that separated her from that desirable state was one small and pretty fur hat which Momsey was just now fitting on in front of the mirror in the little sitting-room.

But it did take a long time just to put on one hat, thought Nan with a sigh. Momsey never used to be so slow. Then, unable to bear it a moment longer, she jumped to her feet and peeped in at the door of the little "dwelling in amity."

What she saw made her pause, a smothered exclamation on her lips, her eyes dancing. For Papa Sherwood was there with Momsey and he was looking at her with as much admiration in his eyes as though they had been married only one year, instead of—oh, Nan couldn't remember how many!

"That trip overseas was just what you needed to make a girl of you again, Momsey," Papa Sherwood was saying in a tone that matched his look. "You might be our Nan's older sister. And isn't that a new hat?"

Momsey had started to make him a demure curt-

sey when Nan's clear laugh interrupted the tête-à-tête.

"Excuse me," she said, her eyes dancing. "Far be it from me to be in the way of anything—and, Momsey, you do look wonderful in that hat—but you know that train won't wait all day. Oh, Momsey! Papa Sherwood!"—she waltzed in upon them and hugged them gaily—"isn't it perfectly, wonderfully gorgeous?"

"What now, honey?" asked Momsey, as she rearranged the pretty hat which Nan had pushed down unbecomingly over one eye.

"What now?" repeated Nan breathlessly. "What now? Why, Florida—Jacksonville—Palm Beach! No, don't look at me as though I had gone crazy. I'm only raving. Come on, come on, you slow pokes." She half pushed her laughing parents toward the door. "You can carry the suitcase, Papa Sherwood, and I'll carry the hat box. There's only one other bundle, and I'll take that one and Momsey can bring up the rear with the lunch. I wonder what Bess will say when she sees the lunch," she chuckled, as her father carefully locked the door of the little house and put the key in his pocket.

"Well, I think I know what she will say when she tastes it," said her father as all three started down the street toward the more pretentious house where Bess lived. "For Momsey put up the lunch with her own hands—and I saw what went into it."

"Yes, and you might tell her, honey," added Mrs. Sherwood, with a soft laugh, "what hard work I had to keep you from eating all the nuts from the brown bread sandwiches."

"Oh, Momsey, don't," sighed Nan. "You will make me hungry again, and I have just had breakfast. See! There's Bess. Goodness, doesn't she look pretty?"

Both Momsey and Papa Sherwood had to admit that Bess was very pretty indeed in the bright winter sunlight, but each privately thought that their Nan, with her sparkling brown eyes and flushed cheeks, was, in her own way, even prettier than Bess.

"Hello, you folks!" called Bess as she reached them, out of breath from exercise and excitement. "I thought you were never coming. Goodness! what are you carrying two grips for? One is enough for me." Then, without waiting for a reply, she raced on to another question. "And that box! What's in it, Nan?" She gazed suspiciously at Nan's mischievous face. "It looks like a lunch box. It never is!"

"Yes, it ever is," mimicked Nan, in exactly Bess's tone, adding with a laugh: "And Papa Sherwood very nearly ate all the nuts from the sandwiches."

"Nan——" began Mrs. Sherwood reproachfully; but at that moment Mrs. Harley appeared in the doorway and the reproaches were forgotten.

Momsey would not go inside, as the minutes to train time were getting very few, so after a short disappearance Mrs. Harley joined them and they started toward the station together. The two girls, Nan and Bess, lead the way, swinging their bags and talking excitedly.

"I'm almost scared to death," confided Bess, as they turned the corner that led down to the station and the train that was to bear them so soon on their wonderful journey.

"Scared?" asked Nan, her eyes big with wonder. "What are you scared about?"

"Oh, I don't suppose I should call it exactly scared," retracted Bess. "Just sort of excited and —and—nervous. Going all alone you know—and everything."

"This isn't the first time we have traveled alone," said Nan practically. "And we have always come out 'right side up with care.'"

"Oh, Nan, you *are* so calm," sighed Bess in exasperation. "Won't anything ever get you excited?"

"Excited," repeated Nan, gazing in amazement at her chum. "I'm so excited this very minute that I'm all thrilly inside."

"If you are," said Bess, eyeing her judicially, "nobody would ever know it. That's just the trouble with you," she added plaintively, "you are always hiding things and having secrets from me when you

know very well that no one ought ever to have a secret from her chum."

Nan put an arm about the waist of the girl and laughed.

"You can't quarrel with me, especially this morning, Bess," she said, adding soothingly: "Besides, I haven't had a secret from you in—oh, ever so long. Not since Beautiful Beulah."

For Bess had been very much put out indeed about Nan's secret possession of Beautiful Beulah, the big doll that had formerly helped Nan over many difficulties.

"I know," said Bess, in answer to Nan's declaration. "But that is just the reason why I expect you to start something. You have been 'too good to be true.' "

"Well, you are a silly," said Nan absently, as her eyes wandered down the double line of shining rails to the spot where they disappeared in the distance. "I wonder if that mean old train is going to be late after all."

"No, there it is! There it is, Nan!" cried Bess, suddenly dancing wildly up and down the platform. "Oh, tell the folks to hurry. Mother has my hat box. I never, never could go to Palm Beach without that hat." And she ran back toward the older folks, waving her bag at them frantically while Nan looked after her laughingly.

"I wonder what Bess would do," she thought,

without the slightest trace of conceit, "if she didn't have me to anchor her down all the time."

The train steamed into the station just as Momsey and Papa Sherwood and Mrs. Harley, with the excited Elizabeth in the lead, rushed upon the platform.

Nan was very much surprised to find that though she had become used to rather frequent partings with Momsey and Papa Sherwood, this one was not one bit easier than the others had been.

She hugged Papa Sherwood, kissed Momsey a dozen times, in spite of the fact that Bess was tugging at her elbow, and finally stumbled some way up the steps and into the car.

"Goodness! Anybody would think you were going away to stay forever," gasped Bess, as she tried to disengage herself from a tangle of bag and hat box and umbrella. "For goodness' sake, look out, Nan. We are moving." This, because Nan stuck her head far out of the window to get a last look at the dear folks on the platform.

"I know we're moving," sighed Nan, as she turned from the window and began patiently to separate Bess from her belongings and stow the articles away in the wire basket overhead. "I always have a funny feeling as if I were leaving half of me behind every time I say good-bye to Momsey and Papa Sherwood."

"I should think you would be used to it by this

time," said Bess, as she removed her hat and fluffed out her pretty curls. "We certainly can't complain of having to stay too much in one place."

"I should say not!" exclaimed Nan, as she thought of how many wonderful things had happened since that day when she had started out for the great north woods with Uncle Henry. "But, oh, Bess," she added, turning happy eyes upon her chum, "we never went on quite such a wonderful journey as this—not even when we went to Rose Ranch."

"It all comes of having such nice friends," replied Bess, taking out a tiny hand mirror and regarding the tip of her nose critically. "And friends with money," she added significantly.

"Bess! How you talk!" cried the girl from Tillbury, turning a shocked gaze upon her friend. For Nan Sherwood never failed to be shocked at Elizabeth's very evident love of money and what it could buy. "If it were only money we cared for we might have made friends with Linda Riggs, I suppose. I heard her say something about going to Europe next summer, and I shouldn't wonder if she would take Cora Courtney and one or two more of her satellites with her. Perhaps if we had been very good, she might have asked us."

"Well, it would have been fun," said Bess, wickedly enjoying the shocked look that deepened on Nan's face. "Cheer up, Nan," she added with one

of her sudden changes of mood. "You know very well how I hate Linda. However," she continued, "I suppose we really ought to be grateful to her now."

"Grateful?" repeated Nan wonderingly.

"For damaging the heating plant up at school, silly," explained Bess, "and giving us a chance to go to Florida."

CHAPTER XV

WE'RE OFF!

NAN could not help laughing at this speech of her chum's, and she turned her chair about to face Bess. Nan did not like riding backward in a train very much herself, but as Bess had declared she "simply couldn't stand it," it was unselfish Nan, as usual, who did the unpleasant thing.

But, the chair turned, as she sank down into its luxurious depth she looked across gravely at her friend.

"I don't see why you say that Linda did that awful thing up at school," she said. "We haven't the slightest proof in the world that she was the guilty one. That handkerchief you found didn't really prove anything."

Bess sniffed as she reached over to open her bag and get out from among its heterogeneous contents a box of sweets she had thoughtfully remembered to slip in before she started.

"Of course we don't know that she did it," she said, opening the box and offering it to Nan. "But

you know very well there isn't another girl in the school who is mean enough to think of such a thing."

"Y-yes," answered Nan doubtfully, as she pushed the candy over toward its owner. "But on the other hand, I never thought Linda had nerve enough to do anything like that. Why, she might have been dreadfully hurt herself!"

"Of course she didn't know that she was in danger," retorted Bess, with a scornful little toss of her head. "She didn't have brains enough."

"Just the same," said Nan decidedly, "I don't think we ought to accuse her until we have something definite to go on."

"Isn't that just like Nan Sherwood!" cried Bess, regarding her chum with a mixture of fondness and irritation. "Always making excuses for everybody! I suppose if we had caught Linda in the act, you would still say it must have been somebody else."

"Hardly as bad as that," said Nan, with a little laugh, adding, while a cloud passed over her face: "Goodness knows I have more reason than any of the rest of the girls for disliking Linda. She never accused any one but me of stealing. I only hope," she added, "that we don't meet her somewhere on this trip."

"Goodness gracious, Nan!" cried Bess, fairly jumping from her seat in surprise, "you don't expect to meet her, do you?"

"If I did," said Nan ruefully, "I would get right off this train and go back to Tillbury, much as I have counted on this trip. No, honey," she added, laughing at her own extravagance, "there's no need of your getting excited, for I have no idea that we shall meet Linda at Palm Beach. Only she has the most disconcerting way of popping up in places where you least expect her."

"Well, all I have to say," returned Bess, biting fiercely into a fresh chocolate and wishing it were Linda instead, "is that I wish you wouldn't put such uncomfortable ideas into my head. Here I was just about forgetting Linda, and you have to lug her into the limelight again."

Nan laughed merrily and helped herself to another of Bess's chocolates without even so much as a "by your leave."

"Cheer up," she said, with a chuckle, "I've done all the 'lugging' I'm going to for a little while. And in the meantime," she added, her voice thrilling with anticipation, "let's think of something really pleasant—Palm Beach, for instance."

"Now you are talking!" cried Bess approvingly. "I have to pinch myself about every five minutes to realize that I'm really going there. I wonder if it is really as gay as people say it is. That's where all the actresses go, you know. And millionaires and authors——"

"And bald-headed business men and fussy, over-

dressed women," added Nan demurely, her eyes twinkling at the look of horror that Bess turned upon her.

"Nan, how can you?" Bess burst out, as Nan had fully expected her to do. "Bald-headed men, indeed! Do you suppose I have come all this way just to see a lot of old bald-headed men?"

"You haven't come yet," Nan reminded her, her eyes sparkling. "I didn't say *all* the men were bald-headed," she added, in an attempt to soothe her outraged companion. "But dad says most of them are —especially the millionaires."

"Oh, how—how—dreadful!" stuttered Bess. "Why, all the millionaires I ever saw had beautiful, leonine heads with shaggy manes of thick white hair and strong, clearly cut chins——"

"That's in the movies," Nan interrupted with a chuckle. "Papa Sherwood says that if all the men had hair like the movie heroes they would have to spend all their energy growing it and wouldn't have time to attend to their brains. And then where would their millions be?"

"Well," said Bess, unable to find an answer to this queer question, yet still indignant, nevertheless, "you needn't go to work to spoil all my illusions. I don't believe you have a speck of romance anywhere about you, Nan Sherwood."

"Maybe I haven't," Nan admitted cheerfully, without looking the slightest bit worried about it.

"But I expect to have lots of fun, just the same. Oh, Bess, look out!"

Bess, who had stood up to pull down the shade, jumped and looked about at Nan wildly.

"What's the matter?" she gasped. "Train on fire?"

"No. But you almost sat on a chocolate," said Nan calmly, as she removed the large and luscious sweet from Bess's seat. Bess stared at her reproachfully and sank back into the chair.

"You might just as well kill me as scare me to death," she said reproachfully.

For a while after that the happy girls forgot to talk and sat staring contentedly out at the flying landscape while the train pounded on heavily over the rails, singing its everlasting "catch 'em up, catch 'em up, catch 'em up."

Then suddenly Bess spoke, taking up the conversation where they had left it.

"If all we are going to find at Palm Beach is bald men and fussy women," she said, "I must say I don't see how we are going to have much fun."

"Oh, don't be such a silly," laughed Nan. "Of course we are going to find something else. There's the ocean and the palm trees. They say the scenery is perfectly gorgeous and the two big hotels wonderful, and there'll be the crowds and crowds of people. And then we shall meet Grace and Walter——"

"And Walter," repeated Bess teasingly, then laughed at the other girl's quick blush.

"Now I know you are silly," said Nan crossly. "You know you are glad Walter is going to be there."

"Of course I am," admitted Bess with suspicious promptness. "Walter is jolly good fun, especially when he has his *Bargain Rush* with him. But lately the rest of us girls—even Grace—have to hang on to his coat-tails to keep him from going off alone with you. He doesn't seem to know there's any one else around. Oh, you don't need to look so surprised, Miss Innocence," she added, as Nan regarded her with wide-open eyes. "You know it just as well as the rest of us."

"Oh—oh—I never heard of such a thing!" cried Nan, and her amazement was unfeigned. "I think you are perfectly horrid. Why, Walter has always been lovely to all of us. And as to his going off with me alone—why, that's nonsense, and you know it, Bess Harley!" Nan's amazement was rapidly giving way to indignation. "Walter has never gone off anywhere alone with me, never!"

"I know he hasn't," admitted Bess, with a chuckle. "And for a very good reason. We wouldn't let him."

Nan stared for a minute. Then something surprisingly like tears filled her eyes and she turned quickly to the window.

"I don't think you are nice," she said in a low voice. "If Walter has been any nicer to me than he has to any one else, I surely haven't noticed it. And now you've gone and spoiled everything. I won't want to go anywhere with him now just because I will be afraid you girls are saying silly things. And Walter's such awfully good fun!" The last was very much in the nature of a wail, and Bess's heart, which was never very hard at any time, softened and she slipped over to Nan's chair and put an arm about her chum.

"Move over," she commanded. "It's lucky neither of us is very fat or we couldn't both sit in one chair. That's right," as Nan obediently "moved over" but still kept her face to the window. "Now say you forgive me for being such an old bear. After all, honey," and she patted Nan's shoulder soothingly, "I suppose it isn't your fault if Walter likes you best."

Nan's shoulder moved impatiently.

"But he doesn't," she insisted, staring out of the window. "It isn't so."

"All right," agreed Bess soothingly. But it was lucky Nan could not see the twinkle in her eye. "Have it your own way, Nan. Only stop turning your back to me. It isn't polite. And, oh!" she added, with a little sigh, "I'm hungry."

At this sudden and very unromantic change in the subject Nan laughed. And as laughter and ill-tem-

per never go hand in hand, it was not long before Nan had forgotten all about Walter—almost.

She produced the lunch box, and for once Bess was too ravenously hungry to protest at the "commonness" of it, and they set to at its delicious contents with a will.

It was eight o'clock when they went into the sleeping car, as they had been unable to secure a berth in Tillbury, and had had to telegraph ahead to have one reserved on a coach which was attached to the train further along the line.

"This is more like it," said Nan, as they entered the sleeping car. "I'll be glad enough to go to bed just as soon as we can see no more of the scenery we are passing."

"Who is to take the upper berth, you or I?" demanded her companion.

"Maybe we had better toss up for it," said Nan.

Just then the girls observed a lady on the opposite side of the aisle telling the colored porter not to fix the upper berth at all, that she and her daughter would both sleep below.

"Let's do that," suggested Nan.

"By all means," answered Bess; and so it was settled.

"Lots o' folks don't use dat dar upper berth," explained the porter as he fixed the lower bed only. "They leaves it up and dat gives 'em so much more room to stand up an' dress an' undress."

"It will just suit us," declared Bess.

Soon the berth was ready and a little later the girls retired.

Being together they had thought to have a good "talk-fest," as Bess called it. But alas! both were so tired out that they fell asleep almost before they knew it. And neither woke up until morning, when they were rolling into New York City.

"Gracious; time to get up!" and Nan lost no time in dressing and Bess followed her example.

The first part of their momentous journey had come to an end.

CHAPTER XVI

FUN AND NONSENSE

In her impatience Bess Harley thought she had never known a crowd to move so slowly. Of course all the people on the train were getting out at New York, for the simple reason that the train did not go any farther.

At any other time the girls would have been tremendously pleased about going to New York. But now, with the even more wonderful prospect of Florida looming up, New York appealed to them simply as a means to an end.

"It's that fat man at the end," hissed Bess in Nan's ear. "He's holding up the whole procession. What's he talking about, anyway?"

"Sh-h," whispered Nan. "He may hear you. Are you sure you have everything, honey?" she added, making a mental count of Bess's belongings to make certain that her careless chum had left nothing behind.

"For goodness' sake, Nan Sherwood, I wonder you don't have a record made of that question and then turn it on every five minutes or so," said Bess,

whose temper was beginning to be ruffled by the delay. "That's all I hear from morning to night. 'Are you sure you have everything?' I think I'll try it on you and see how you like it."

"Oh, I'd love it," cried Nan, with such fervor that Bess looked at her in surprise. "It's this bag," explained Nan, looking down at her own handsome suitcase. "I'm certain it will be stolen or I'll lose it or something before we can get to Florida."

"Well, it is an expensive suitcase," Bess admitted, as the fat man at the front of the car finished his argument with the conductor and the line of passengers moved slowly on toward the door. "But you never used to lie awake at night worrying about it."

It was Nan's turn to look her amazement.

"It isn't the bag I'm worrying about, and you ought to know that," she said in a low voice. "It's what is in the bag."

"Oh!" said Bess, suddenly remembering, "you mean those papers Mrs. Bragley gave you? Well, I wouldn't worry about them," she added carelessly. "I don't believe they are really worth anything, anyway."

"Oh, hush," Nan begged her as they stepped upon the platform and a man turned to look at them curiously. "Please don't mention any names, Bess. It might make trouble."

"Why, Nan Sherwood, how you talk!" cried Bess,

turning to look curiously at her chum. "You might really think those old papers were worth something."

"I believe they are," said Nan seriously, as, with bag clutched tightly in her hand, she started with Bess down the long blustling platform. "Anyway, I want to do my best to help the poor woman. I felt dreadfully sorry for her."

"I feel sorry for everybody who isn't going to Palm Beach," cried Bess gaily, as she looked about her with sparkling eyes. "Oh, Nan, isn't this a lark?"

"You'd better look out," cried Nan sharply, as Bess stepped directly in front of a heaped-up baggage truck that was being trundled heavily down the platform, "or it will be a tragedy instead."

The girls had supposed they had become accustomed to the noise and confusion of a big city during their visit in Chicago, but as they stepped from the great Pennsylvania Station on to the crowded New York street they felt disconcertingly like startled country girls arriving in the city for the first time.

"Goodness! I thought Chicago was awful," whispered Bess in Nan's ear. "But this is worse. What shall we do?"

"That's easy," said Nan, taking command of the situation as usual. "Papa Sherwood told me to take a taxi straight over to the dock and not to speak to any one on the way."

"Well, I think we'll have our choice of taxis," remarked Bess, with a chuckle, as several chauffeurs standing by or sitting in cabs drawn up along the curb espied the well-dressed girls and immediately set up a cry of "Taxi, taxi! Right this way, lady!"

Looking as if she had been used to riding around in taxicabs in strange and noisy cities all her life, Nan walked forward, still clutching the precious bag that held Mrs. Bragley's papers and calmly selected a brilliant yellow cab whose driver opened the door to her respectfully.

Bess followed, all eyes and ears for the noise and confusion of the street. Nan gave instructions to the chauffeur, who touched his cap, slammed the door shut on the girls and sprang to his seat in front.

"I think you are just wonderful, Nan Sherwood," said Bess, when they were gliding swiftly off through the bewildering traffic. "I was frightened to death when all those men started shouting at us at once. I wanted to run back into the station and hide. But *you* didn't, and of course *I* didn't, and here we are!" She gave an excited little bounce on the seat. "Only," she added reproachfully, "I don't see why you picked out a yellow taxi. You know I hate yellow."

"Goodness! I didn't even notice the color," said Nan, feeling her suitcase with one foot to be sure it was still there. "If you will just tell me what

color you like best I'll send a note to the governor and ask him to have them painted that way."

"How sweet of you," mocked Bess, and a moment later grasped her chum's arm in fright. "Did you see that?" she cried, as the driver put on his brakes and they stopped within about two inches of the back of a great lumbering truck. "I'm afraid this driver is going to kill us before ever we can get to the dock."

"Never mind, honey," said Nan soothingly, though she herself had been considerably startled at the close call. "Papa Sherwood says all the drivers are like that in New York, and yet there are very few accidents. We must be near the dock, anyway."

"Isn't that horrid?" cried Bess with one of her quick changes of interest. "Just think, we'll have to go and leave New York before we have really seen anything of it."

Nan shrugged her shoulders helplessly.

"I thought you weren't enjoying your ride," she said, "and here you are bemoaning the fact that it is nearly over. Bess, I give you up."

Bess merely chuckled, and a few minutes later insisted upon stopping the machine while she got out and bought some oranges from a tempting fruit-stand.

"Now," she said, proudly exhibiting her purchase to Nan when the car was once more bumping onward over cobblestones toward the dock, "we sha'n't

starve on our trip, anyway. Oh, look, Nan; we're there!" she cried, pointing excitedly out of the window. "See that thing over there that looks like something between a cave and a barn with a sign over it? That must be the entrance to one of the docks. Yes, see the people going in? And there's another and another. Oh, oh!"

"For goodness' sake, sit still," commanded Nan. "You're spilling all the oranges."

"My, what a joy killer you are, Nan Sherwood," sighed Bess, as she rebelliously stuffed the bag of oranges into her already over-filled suitcase. "What are a few oranges more or less at a glorious time like this?"

Then the taxicab left the rough pavement and rolled along over the smooth asphalt. On all sides of them were trucks and autos, with here and there a horse-drawn vehicle. The noise was something awful.

"Goodness gracious, how different from the quietness at the Hall!" remarked Bess.

"And how different even from Tillbury," returned Nan.

"What a lot of foreigners here, Nan."

"I guess they come from the ships. The docks are all along here, so I've been told."

"I wouldn't want to come down here after dark and all alone."

"No, I'd not like that myself, Bess."

"Some of those men look like regular Italian brigands."

"Yes, and others look like Russian anarchists."

Suddenly the machine came to a standstill and the man in front looked about at Nan and repeated the instructions she had given him to make sure he had them correctly.

"That's right," answered Nan, nodding. "We must be almost there, aren't we?"

"Yes, Miss," said the man, as he started the car again. "See that dock over yonder? That's it." And he swung the machine about in a semicircle and headed for one of the openings which Bess had described as "something between a cave and a barn."

"Nan, I never felt so funny before," Bess confided to her chum. "I think I am going to faint or something."

"And I think you had better not," said Nan, in alarm. "I have all I can do to carry my own luggage without having you piled on top of it."

"You wouldn't have to carry me," giggled Bess incorrigibly. "I'd ask the good-looking chauffeur to do it."

"How could you ask him anything if you had fainted?" asked Nan, beginning systematically to get her things together. "Hurry up, Bess. I guess this is where we get off. Are you sure——"

"You have everything?" finished the irrepressible

Bess with another giggle. "I was just waiting for that. Look out, Nan. You stepped on my toe."

"I know it," said Nan calmly. "I did it on purpose."

Nan seized the opportunity to make good her escape, and Bess, following close upon her heels, whispered dramatically in her ear: "Take care, woman! You shall not again escape me. Next time I will spit thee like a goose."

"All right," said Nan, turning calmly to the driver who was waiting for his fee. "Only wait a minute, will you? I have to pay the fare."

CHAPTER XVII

THE MYSTERIOUS MEN

As the machine drove away several street urchins came running toward the girls, begging the privilege of carrying their bags. Nan would have refused, the bags being not at all heavy and the walk to the end of the dock from the entrance not very far, but Bess nudged her sharply.

"Go ahead," she urged. "I have a quarter to pay for it. Don't be a silly."

So Nan obeyed and reluctantly handed over to one of the eager street urchins the handsome bag which contained, among other things, Mrs. Bragley's papers. Bess had already loaded the small boy with her own belongings, and it seemed impossible to Nan that the lad could be able to carry it all.

Yet he sauntered ahead quite cheerfully while the other boys turned away disappointed to wait for the next arrival.

As the girls emerged from the long, tunnel-like entrance into the bright sunshine of the dock they quickened their steps instinctively. The steamship

Dorian, which was to carry them to Florida, was already waiting for the passengers.

Nan had never seen a harbor like this before, and she gazed with fascinated eyes out over the glistening water, dotted thickly with craft of all sizes and descriptions.

There were a great many docks like the kind upon which she and Bess were standing, and they stretched out into the harbor like so many legs of an octopus, cleaving the brilliant water with dark ugly gashes.

Over all the bustling harbor was a sense of feverish activity, of mystery and romance, of adventuring in far, fair lands that set Nan's blood atingle and made her breath come quickly.

"What are you waiting for?" Bess asked impatiently, and Nan roused from her reverie with a start.

"I wasn't waiting, I was just looking," said Nan in a soft voice, as they started up the gangplank that led to the deck of the *Dorian.* "I never saw anything so wonderful."

"Beg pardon, Miss," said a voice in her ear, and a small hand was laid upon her arm.

Nan turned quickly and saw that it was their small luggage carrier. In their preoccupation the girls had both of them forgotten about their precious bags.

With quick fingers Nan fished in her purse for

the necessary quarter, gave it to the boy and received her bag in return.

"Oh, Bess!" she cried as the boy tipped his cap and started on, "how could I ever have done such a thing? Why, if I had lost this bag I never would have dared face Mrs. Bragley again. Never in this wide world!"

"I wish Mrs. Bragley were in Guinea," said Bess crossly. "She and her old papers are just about going to spoil our trip. They are making you as nervous as a cat."

"Sh-h, Bess, not so loud," cautioned Nan, as they stepped upon the deck of the *Dorian* and handed over the tickets which Papa Sherwood had secured for them.

It was perhaps fortunate for the girls' peace of mind that they did not notice two men who were closely behind them. One of the men was fat and short and had little eyes and a bald head, which he was now mopping vigorously with a rather soiled handkerchief.

His companion was his complete opposite. He was tall and thin, with a severe, straight line for a mouth and long, nervous hands, and had a habit of caressing his beardless chin as though a beard had once grown there.

As the tall thin man, whom his companion called Jensen, overheard Nan's startled reference to Mrs. Bragley's papers, he put a hand upon the fat man's

arm and nodded once with a sort of jerk of satisfaction.

"What did I say, Davis?" he asked, in a carefully guarded voice. "I tell you, I am never wrong." And his eyes followed the girls as they started down the deck in the direction of their cabin.

As they, in turn, stepped upon the deck, the short man looked up at his tall companion and said rather enigmatically: "Sometimes I wonder, Jensen, whether you are a great man, or a great fool. It's certainly great to have them on this trip to Florida with us."

Although the girls knew nothing of this strange conversation, Nan was extremely careful to stow her bag away in a corner of their stateroom and piled several things on it and about it so that it could not be easily seen by curious eyes.

"Nan, if you don't leave that old thing alone I'm going to throw it overboard," Bess finally said complainingly. "You act as if it contained diamonds and rubies instead of——"

"Oh, please hush," said Nan, rising quickly from her knees and coming over to Bess. "I don't know what has gotten into me lately, Bess dear," she said, speaking so earnestly that her chum regarded her in surprise; "but ever since I took charge of those papers I have had the strangest impression that I am being watched."

"Nan!" cried Bess, looking uneasily over her

shoulder, "what a terrible thing. But, of course, it's only imagination," she added easily, for it was instinct with Bess to cast aside anything that threatened to worry her or interfere with her fun. "I told you the old papers were getting on your nerves."

"You're right," said Nan, with a little sigh as she rose to take off her coat and hat and straighten her hair before the tiny mirror. "They certainly are getting on my nerves."

"Well, for goodness' sake get them off then," commanded Bess, bouncing impatiently on a berth. "I never saw such a girl to take everybody else's troubles on her own shoulders. I'll be glad when you turn the papers over to Mr. Mason."

Nan smiled a resigned little smile at her reflection in the mirror. Then she came over and put an arm about her pouting chum.

"All right," she promised gaily, "I won't ever do it again. Only come on and smile, honey. If you knew how pretty you look when you do, you would never do anything else."

There are very few girls who can withstand an appeal like that, and Bess was not one of them. A smile replaced the frown immediately and the next minute she was chatting merrily about their crowded little stateroom and the two narrow berths, one above the other, wondering with a grimace whether they would be seasick or not, and so, on and on, till

Nan's momentary depression forsook her and she felt again the thrill that had quickened her blood as they had stood on the dock, gazing out over the harbor.

Yet, almost unknown to Nan herself, there lingered in the back of her mind a strange, uneasy premonition of trouble to come, and again and again her eyes sought the spot where the bag with Mrs. Bagley's papers stowed safely inside lay hidden.

"I wonder which one of us is going to take the upper berth," Bess chattered gaily on. "You had better, Nan, because you're thinner than I. And then if the berth should cave in it wouldn't hurt you so much because there would be something soft to fall on. It's a snug little place, isn't it?"

"Snug is right," said Nan, with a giggle. "You can't turn around without running in to something."

"That's Linda's fault. She shouldn't have wrecked the heating system at school in the Palm Beach season. If it had been in December now, or March, there wouldn't have been such a crowd and we could have had a real honest to goodness stateroom, instead of this two-by-one hole in the wall."

"Elizabeth, how shocking," laughed Nan. "You must have been taking lessons from Walter." And then, for no apparent reason at all, or perhaps because of the expression in her chum's eyes as they

rested upon her, Nan became suddenly confused and hurriedly changed the subject.

"Let's go outside," she suggested, rising and making toward the door of the stateroom, which opened directly out upon the deck. "It—it's awfully hot in here."

Bess laughed tantalizingly and stretched lazily as she prepared to follow her chum.

"Nan, honey," she drawled, irrelevantly, or so it seemed to Nan, "you are a darling, but, oh, you're awfully foolish."

CHAPTER XVIII

A STARTLING REVELATION

It was a wonderful journey, that one to Jacksonville, and one the girls never forgot. At first the weather was unpleasant, cold and blowy, but toward the afternoon of the second day the gentle winds of the south fanned them with their welcoming breath, and heavy wraps began to feel burdensome.

At first the girls had been afraid that they would become seasick and had wondered what they would do should such a weakness overtake them.

"I know I'll just lie down and die, if I get sick on this steamer," Bess had declared.

"Oh, no, you won't, Bess," Nan had made reply. "You'll do as everybody else has to—grin and bear it."

"But to be sick on a ship that is rolling and pitching all the time——"

"You can keep in your berth, you know."

"There is no fun in that."

"Then go on deck—and make an exhibition of yourself."

"Nan Sherwood, I think that, on occasion, you are utterly heartless."

"So are you."

"Oh, I see. Trying to get square for what I said about Walter Mason."

"Not at all. I am only——"

But there Nan had had to stop, for a sudden lurch of the steamer had thrown her against the wash-stand. Bess had gone sprawling on the floor.

"I—I didn't think it would be so rough," Bess had gasped out, on arising.

"I—I don't think it is going to be so awful bad," Nan had declared. And she had been right. By noon of the second day the sea was quite smooth. Neither of the girls felt a bit of seasickness and both were glad to go on deck and enjoy the sunshine.

"What a change since yesterday," said Bess, as the two girls stood by the rail looking out over the lazily rolling water. "It seems almost like magic, doesn't it?"

"It's wonderful," breathed Nan happily. "It seemed so silly to pack all my summer things when the wind was blowing like mad and it was ten above zero in Tillbury. But now I'm mighty glad we did. Whew, isn't this coat warm!"

"Cheer up," cried Bess gaily. "Maybe by to-night it will be so warm we can put all our winter things in storage and blossom out in silk georgette and white flannels like veritable butterflies from a crys-

tal—I mean chrysalis. Nan, are you listening to me?" she demanded severely, for Nan's eyes had deserted the long line of lazy combers and were following the figures of two men, one long and one short, who were strolling slowly down the deck.

"Bess, do you see those men?" asked Nan, with a troubled inflection that caused Bess to look at her sharply.

"Yes, my dear," she answered. "My eyes are still in good working condition."

"Does there seem anything strange about them?" Nan insisted. "Anything like spying?"

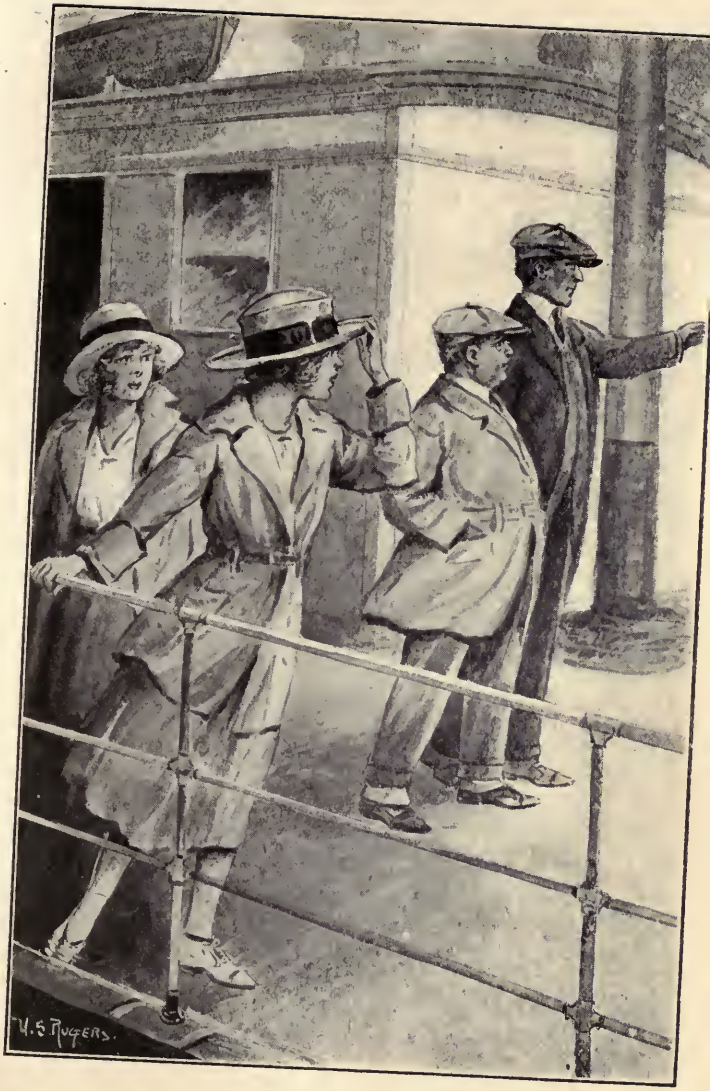
Bess jumped and regarded the back of her chum's head reproachfully.

"For goodness' sake, Nan!" she cried, "you are never going to start that all over again, are you? I thought you had got over that silly notion you had of being followed."

"I wish it were only a notion, Bess," said the girl, turning such a serious face to her chum that for once even careless Bess was sobered.

"Why, Nan, what do you mean?" she asked. "You can't mean that there is really somebody spying upon you!"

"That's just what I do mean," said Nan soberly. "I didn't want to worry you, Bess, so I didn't tell you. But something happened last night——" She stopped suddenly, for the two men were coming back again, apparently absorbed in conversation.



Nan's eyes were following the figures of two men strolling down the deck.

(*See page 140*)

Presently the tall man and his short companion passed and as they did so Nan gave each a searching look. The men did not happen to see the girls, and soon were out of sight around a turn.

"I am almost sure they are the same," murmured Nan and her face was a study.

"Nan, you talk in riddles!" cried her chum. "What does it mean?"

"I'll tell you, Bess, even though I don't want to frighten you still more."

And thereupon Nan related how she had seen two strange men near her home and at the local drug-store and the railroad station, and how one had stepped up as if to speak to her and then hurried away.

"I am almost sure they are the same, and, oh, Bess, one of them has such an awful look in his eyes! I am sure they cannot be at all nice."

"Humph! That is certainly strange," murmured Bess. "I guess those chaps will bear watching. What can they be up to, do you think—watching your house and following you like that?"

"I haven't finished. Last night——"

"Oh, yes, you started to tell about last night. Go ahead—oh, it's so exciting—just like a movies!"

"You remember we went down to the dining-room together," Nan went on in a low tone, "and I suddenly remembered that we had forgotten to lock the door. I was a little frightened, for I thought of

Mrs. Bragley's papers and our jewelry, and I almost ran back.

"Just as I opened the door," Nan's voice quickened with excitement and Bess leaped forward eagerly, "I saw a shadow on the glass of the other door —the one that opens upon the deck."

"Why, Nan! are you sure?" gasped Bess, catching herself up quickly to add, "Never mind. Don't bother to answer me. What happened next?"

"Well, for a minute I just stood there," said Nan, her eyes searching nervously for the reappearance of the two men on deck. "I guess I was just too surprised or frightened to speak, for the shadow on the door was that of a man, and he was trying the door!"

"Oh, Nan, what did you do?" demanded her wide-eyed chum. "I should just have screamed and run away."

"A lot of good that would have done," said Nan, a little contemptuously. "I wanted to scream, but I didn't think of running away."

"Of course you wouldn't," said Bess humbly. "But go on, Nan. What did you do?"

"I threw a bathrobe over my grip in the first place," said Nan. "I had left it standing out in the room. And then I pulled the door open just as the man started to open it from the outside."

"Oh, Nan!" cried Bess again. "Then he really meant to come in?"

"Of course he did—although he said he didn't," said Nan grimly. "When I pulled the door open suddenly and stood looking at him he acted as if I was a ghost or something. He did for a minute, that is. Then he straightened up and sort of put on a smile—you know, the way you would put on a coat to cover up a soiled dress or something——"

"Why, Nan, I never——" Bess began indignantly, then interrupted herself again. "Never mind me," she begged. "You've got me so excited that I don't know just what I'm saying. What happened then, Nan? Didn't you say something?"

"Of course I said something," returned Nan. "I asked him what he was doing at my stateroom door and what he wanted."

"What did he say?" whispered Bess, her eyes wide in wonder.

"He said that he was very sorry. That he thought this was his stateroom. That he wouldn't have startled me for the world. And then he bowed himself out and I slammed the door after him."

"But, Nan," Bess had regained her breath again and felt in the mood for an argument, "how do you know that the man really hadn't made a mistake? I suppose it would be easy enough to get mixed up."

"Bess, that man didn't make any mistake," said Nan Sherwood with such conviction in her voice that once more Bess was startled.

"How do you know?"

"He was the meanest man I ever saw—his looks I mean," said Nan, apparently not noticing her chum's interruption. "If you could have seen him as I opened the door, you would feel just the way I do. He had probably seen us going down to dinner and thought it was a good chance to get into the stateroom and steal——"

"Steal!" gasped poor Bess, for Nan was getting her pretty thoroughly frightened. "You mean he was a thief, Nan?"

"Of course," Nan returned impatiently. "I don't suppose honest men are in the habit of sneaking into empty staterooms."

"But if it was a mistake——" Bess interrupted, grasping at a straw.

"It wasn't any mistake," Nan repeated gravely. "If he had thought it was his own door, he would have opened it quickly. He wouldn't have been so slow and cautious about it."

"But, Nan! what could he have wanted to steal from us? It isn't as though we had one of those handsome staterooms down below that cost a fortune to hire even for a night. We haven't anything so very valuable."

"Except Mrs. Bragley's papers," said Nan grimly. "I wonder you didn't think of them."

"Oh!" said Bess. "The papers! Yes, of course there were the papers. Why, Nan," she turned upon her chum excitedly, "do you really suppose

they can be as important as that? Why, I never dreamed——"

"I know you didn't. But I did," said Nan decidedly. She then added under her breath as the two men turned a corner and again headed down the deck toward them: "Don't say anything. Wait until these men have passed and then look at them, the tall, thin one in particular."

Bess was about to exclaim, but Nan silenced her with a look and they waited quietly while the strangers once more sauntered past them. Evidently they were taking a prolonged constitutional about the deck.

Bess stole a quick glance at them and then turned back to her chum.

"They are the same men who passed us just a little while ago," she said with a puzzled frown.

"Yes. And one of them, the tall, thin one with a slit for a mouth, is the man who tried to enter our stateroom," said Nan earnestly. "I'm just telling you this so that you will be more careful to lock our stateroom door whenever you go in or out."

"Goodness—Gracious—Agnes!" gasped Bess, mimicking Procrastination Boggs in her agitation. "You are actually making me nervous, Nan Sherwood. Lock the door, indeed! As if we were afraid of being murdered in our beds! Why, I sha'n't sleep a wink to-night. I never heard of such a thing."

"You needn't look at me as if I were to blame," said Nan with spirit. "I didn't ask that horrid thin thing and his little fat friend to follow us all over and nearly give me heart failure. I'll be glad when this trip is over, I'll tell you that."

"So will I," said Bess morosely. "But I'll be gladder still when you get rid of those old papers of Mrs. Bragley's—if that is what they are after."

"The one thing that makes me feel good," said Nan thoughtfully, as if speaking to herself, "is that the papers must be worth something or these horrid men wouldn't be so anxious to get them back. Maybe we shall find that poor Mrs. Bragley is a rich woman yet."

"Either that, or else that we have made a big mistake and the men are not after the papers at all."

"But if not after the papers, what?"

"I don't know."

CHAPTER XIX

AN ATTEMPTED THEFT

THAT night the girls were very careful to lock both doors and Bess even went to the length of suggesting that they pile some furniture against them.

"It might be a good idea," Nan had replied, laughing at her, "if there were only some furniture to pile. What are you doing, Bess? You aren't stuffing cotton in the keyhole?"

"You needn't laugh, Miss Smarty," Bess had retorted, straightening up defiantly with a large wad of the cotton still in her hand and a telltale tuft of it protruding from the keyhole. "I'm not going to have any skinny old man with a funny mouth looking in at me while I sleep, I can tell you! Nan Sherwood," she added threateningly, as Nan went off into a gale of uncontrollable mirth, "if you don't stop laughing, I'll stuff the rest of this cotton down your throat, and I just hope you'll choke."

"Oh, Bess! Elizabeth Harley!" gasped Nan. "You look so foolish standing there with that wad

of cotton in your hand. And the keyholes look as if they had the earache. Oh, oh!" and she went off again into half hysterical laughter.

Bess, after staring at her a minute, gave up all attempt at being dignified and joined in merrily.

"Goodness! you would make an Egyptian mummy laugh, Nan Sherwood," said Bess, as she wiped away the tears of mirth. "Who ever heard of keyholes having the earache! Just the same," she added more soberly, as she started to unfasten her dress, "you have got me terribly worried about those men. I know I'll dream of them all night."

"Oh, no, you won't," said Nan serenely, as she set about the business of undressing. Then she added, with a chuckle: "I feel perfectly safe now that the keyholes are stuffed!"

It was not long after this that the two girls laid down to sleep. But Nan was restless and could hardly close her eyes.

"Those old papers," she murmured to herself. "I should have turned them over to Mr. Mason, or put them in the ship's safe. I don't see why I make myself keep them, unless it is that I want to prove to myself that I have *some* backbone."

Presently she heard Bess breathing heavily, showing her chum was in the land of slumber, and then gradually she dozed off.

Nan had been asleep about an hour when she awoke with a start.

She had heard a noise, of that she felt certain—a noise out of the ordinary and not connected with the running of the ship.

What was it? Was somebody trying the door?

She turned over and, feeling for the push button, turned on the electric light. This move awakened Bess.

"What's the matter, are you sick?" asked the latter.

"No. I—I heard something—it woke me up," Nan replied and got to her feet.

"Maybe those men——"

"Hush! If they are outside the door they may hear you, Bess."

With caution the two girls tiptoed to first one door and then the other and peered out.

In the cabin only a porter sleeping in an armchair was to be seen, while out on the deck not a soul was in sight.

"You must have been dreaming, Nan," said Bess, yawning. "Come, let us try to get some more rest before morning."

Nan was not satisfied and looked all around the stateroom, thinking a mouse might be wandering around. But no mouse was found, and at last both girls retired again. But Nan did not sleep very well and was glad when the rising sun proclaimed another day at hand.

Nan, swinging one bare foot experimentally over

the edge of her berth, felt it caught and held tight by an invisible hand. She peered over the edge of the berth at the imminent risk of falling over herherself and breaking her neck, and found, as she had expected, that Bess was her captor. The latter was holding on to her foot with one hand and rubbing her eyes sleepily with the other.

"Say, let go my foot," Nan hailed her inelegantly. "Haven't you got enough of your own that you have to steal one of mine?"

"You talk as if we were centipedes," said Bess, releasing Nan's foot and sitting up grumpily in the berth. "I told you I wouldn't sleep a wink last night, and I didn't."

"You aren't the only one," said Nan, as she swung her other foot over the edge of the berth and felt gingerly for a footing on the one below. "I didn't sleep very well myself. But never mind," she added, as she slipped safely to the floor, unharmed by her perilous descent. "We'll forget all about such little things as sleepless nights when we get out on deck. Have you forgotten that we reach Florida to-day?"

Bess stared at her a minute, then scrambled quickly out of bed and began pulling on her clothes hastily, getting them awry in her eagerness to get dressed in the shortest time possible.

"Gracious, Nan," she cried reproachfully, as she began to drag the comb impatiently through her

tumbled curls, "you scared me so with those men and Mrs. Bragley's horrible papers that I forgot everything else. Fancy! A few hours more and we shall be in Florida!"

Immediately this thought put all other thoughts to flight in the mind of careless but lovable Bess Harley, and she would have left the door of their stateroom wide open had not Nan reminded her to close it and turn the key in the lock.

The girls ate breakfast hurriedly, and when they came out on deck it was after eight o'clock. That gave them just time to pack their few belongings before the *Dorian* steamed up the St. Johns River into the busy harbor of Jacksonville.

Bess's prediction had come true. Over night the weather had become so delightfully mild that heavy clothing was not only unnecessary, but very uncomfortable, and the girls had donned white suits and white hats with stockings and shoes to match. They were looking distinctly attractive—and knew it. At least Bess did. And it must be admitted that even modest Nan had been surprised and not a little pleased by her radiant reflection in the tiny mirror in their stateroom.

And now, though they knew that the last minute packing should be done first, they still lingered by the rail, gazing over the brilliantly calm water to where the tropically beautiful Florida coast stood out boldly against the skyline.

"What wonderful, wonderful weather!" sighed Nan, as they finally deserted the rail and made their way through the excited crowd—for nearly every one on board the *Dorian* had come out on deck, clad in white flannels and other summery attire, eager to get their first glimpse of Florida—and on toward their stateroom.

Suddenly Nan clutched her friend's arm and pointed excitedly.

"Look!" she cried in a low voice. "The tall man! He's there with the fat one in front of our door. And, Bess, look! He has something in his hand. It's a key!"

"Oh, Nan!" gasped Bess, "he would never dare. Not in this crowd!"

"Come on!" ejaculated Nan tensely, as she elbowed and pushed her way through the crowd.

The two girls were almost upon the thin man and his companion before they were discovered. Then the fat man nudged his friend sharply, and before the girls could blink the men had slipped around the corner of the cabin and were lost to view among the crowd.

"Let's go after them," cried Bess excitedly. "We mustn't let them get away from us, Nan. Why, they were trying to get into our room. I saw them."

"Oh, Bess, hush," begged Nan as several people turned to look at the girls curiously. "Come inside a minute. I want to talk to you."

She opened the door and half pushed, half dragged the excited Bess inside the stateroom where the latter sank upon the berth and stared at her friend indignantly.

"You've gone and let them get away," she accused her hotly. "And that ugly thin man was trying to get in. We saw him."

"I know all that," said Nan a trifle impatiently. For several days her nerves had been under a considerable strain and the effort to think and act for Bess as well as herself was beginning to tell on her. "It wouldn't have done us the slightest good in the world to have gone after him. We never could have found him."

"But we can at least tell the captain," returned Bess, jumping to her feet impatiently. "I never saw a girl like you, Nan. I really believe you intend to let him get away."

"Well, what else can I do?" asked Nan quietly. "If I go to the captain and tell him I found a couple of men standing in front of my door and that I want them arrested, he will think that I'm crazy."

"But they had a key! They were trying to get in! We saw them!" insisted Bess, pacing excitedly up and down the small stateroom.

"I know we did," said Nan patiently. "But the captain could never arrest the men on such evidence. He would want proof. And you know as well as I do that we haven't any."

"We-el," said Bess irresolutely, sitting down on the edge of the berth and staring blackly at the opposite wall, "I suppose you are right, Nan Sherwood. You usually are. But I do know one thing." She stirred impatiently and mechanically straightened her pretty white hat. "And that is that I won't enjoy myself one bit till we make those men stop following us around and trying to get into our room with skeleton keys. I suppose that is what he had. Oh, dear, it does seem as if something were always happening to take the joy out of life!"

Nan ventured a shaky little laugh at this and began automatically picking up her things and stuffing them into her bag.

"You had better get ready, Bess," she advised. "We shall reach Jacksonville in a little while. We don't want to be left behind."

"I should say not!" said Bess vehemently. "I wouldn't stay on this old boat another night after what happened this morning—not for anything. I hope," she added, as she slammed her brush into her suitcase, "that we sha'n't see any more of those horrid men after we once get on shore."

"I hope we sha'n't." Nan echoed the wish fervently, but in her heart she was very sure that they had not seen the last of the tall, thin man and his chubby companion.

That they were after the papers that had been entrusted to her care by poor, confiding Sarah Brag-

ley, she had little doubt. And the fact that whoever these men were, they were desperately anxious to recover the papers showing the widow's title to the tract of land in Florida, fostered Nan's belief that the property must be of considerable value and automatically strengthened her determination to hold on to the papers at all cost.

She was so engrossed with her own thoughts that Bess had to speak to her twice before she could bring her back to a realization of the present.

"Hurry up," she cried, handing Nan her suitcase and fairly pushing her out on the deck. "From the noise everybody is making, I guess we're there. For goodness' sake, Nan!" she exclaimed as her chum switched her suitcase from one hand to the other, so that it would be between Bess and herself, "don't bump that bag into me—especially right behind the knees. You are apt to make me sit down suddenly."

"You couldn't. There's too much of a crowd," laughed Nan, then added in a lower tone, while her eyes nervously searched the crowd about her: "Please help me to look out for my bag, honey. I'm awfully afraid I might lose it."

CHAPTER XX

THOSE MEN AGAIN

THE two girls saw nothing more of the men who had played such a mysterious part in their trip, and before they had started, with hundreds of other gaily dressed people, down the gangplank of the *Dorian* they had almost forgotten their strange adventure.

Nor, under the circumstances, could this be wondered at. All about them was the bustle and excitement that is always attendant upon going ashore.

Every one was in hilarious holiday mood, and Nan and Bess would have been queer indeed if they had not entered into the spirit of the day with all their hearts.

"I just can't keep my feet still," Bess confided to her chum, as they filed slowly down the gangplank. "Isn't this the most wonderful day you ever saw in your life, Nan? Just think, this kind of weather in *February!* It does me good," she added, her eyes sparkling, "to think of all the other girls at home going around with furs on and thick coats and com-

plaining of the cold. Oh, how I wish I could see them now."

"Elizabeth! what a mean disposition," said Nan demurely, adding with a twinkle in her eyes, while she tried hard to keep her feet from fox-trotting away with her down the gangplank: "Though I would like to send a little note to Linda and tell her to be careful not to go out in the cold. It might make her nose red. Oh, Bess, look down there!" She leaned forward suddenly, her eyes shining with eagerness. "Isn't that Grace? And Walter——"

"And Rhoda! Yes, it is, and they are waving to us," cried Bess eagerly. "Of course Grace and Walter said they would be here to meet us, but I was afraid they never would find us in all this crowd."

Someway the girls got down to the dock, were hugged by Grace and Rhoda, greeted hilariously by Walter, and were hustled, out of breath, through the crowd that thronged about them.

"How in the world did you get here, Rhoda?" demanded Nan, when she could get a chance to ask the question.

"I thought I'd surprise you," declared the girl from Rose Ranch. "I fixed it all up with Grace and told her not to say a word."

"It's grand!" declared Nan, beaming.

"The best ever," added Bess. "Oh, what grand times we girls are going to have!"

"Sure we are going to have a grand time," said

the girl from Rose Ranch. "I think I deserve it, after all the trouble I've been through."

"What do you suppose, she was in a railroad wreck," burst out Grace. "A real, live-to-goodness wreck, too."

"Oh, Rhoda, were you injured?" cried Nan quickly.

"Just a few scratches—on my left elbow and my shins. But it was a close call, I can tell you."

"Where was it?" asked Bess.

"Out in Connecticut. I went there to visit a distant relative of my dad. It was a little side line and our train ran into a freight. We knocked open a car full of chickens and what do you think? Those chickens scattered far and wide. I'll bet many a family is having chicken dinner on the sly this week!"

"Then nobody was hurt?"

"Oh, yes, several were more or less bruised and one man had an arm broken. But everybody was thankful, for they said it might have been much worse. But it certainly was funny to see those chickens scattering in every direction over the snow-covered fields," and Rhoda laughed at the recollection.

"Gee, if a fellow had been there with a gun he might have had some hunting," cried Walter.

"Oh, Walter, you wouldn't hunt chickens with a gun, would you?" asked Nan, reproachfully.

"Don't know as I would," was the quick reply.

"Oh, but now we are together, won't we have lovely times," cried Bess.

"The very best ever," echoed Nan.

"Going to let me out?" demanded Walter.

"No, indeed, Walter, you are included."

The girls and Walter continued to compare notes when all of a sudden Rhoda uttered a cry.

"Girls, am I seeing a ghost?" she asked, staring straight ahead of her toward a group of richly dressed people who were talking and laughing together. "Or is that Linda Riggs?"

"Goodness, don't say it, Rhoda!" cried Bess in dismay. "It can't be Linda!"

But it was! For at that moment the youngest of the much overdressed women in the group turned with a laugh to speak to someone behind her, and the girls found themselves face to face with their schoolgirl enemy, Linda Riggs.

For all their dislike of the girl, the chums would have spoken to her. But Linda stared at them coolly for a second, and then deliberately turned her back upon them and began to speak to a tall, gray-haired man at her right, who the girls instinctively felt must be her father, the railroad president.

"Those young ladies seemed to know you, my dear," they heard the tall man say to Linda, as, flushed and indignant, the girls and Walter pressed on through the crowd.

"They do," they heard Linda answer contemptuously, and with no attempt to lower her voice. "But I prefer not to know them—especially that Sherwood girl."

What the tall man said in answer, the girls could not hear, for they were once more engulfed in a sea of chattering humanity whose din swallowed up all individual sound.

Impulsive Bess wanted to turn back and tell "that horrible Riggs girl" what she thought of her, but Nan put an arm about her angry chum and hurried her on.

"But, Nan, I don't see how you can stand such things and never say a word," cried Bess, indignantly. "I do believe you haven't any spirit. I never could take an insult like that so calmly."

"I'm not a bit calm," replied Nan, gripping her bag fiercely. "Right this minute, I'd like to get hold of Linda Riggs and tear her hair out by the roots."

"Why didn't you do it then?" demanded excited Bess, and at this query even Walter, who had been more incensed than any of the girls at the insolent speech of Linda's, had to laugh.

"Yes, I would look pretty, wouldn't I?" laughed Nan, all her wrath vanishing on the instant, although her dislike of purse-proud Linda was more real than ever, "announcing my arrival in Jacksonville by a street fight?"

"You would look pretty any way—even pulling Linda's hair out," laughed Walter in her ear.

"Please don't be foolish, Walter," returned Nan loftily, at which, for some unaccountable reason, Walter only chuckled the more.

The speech and the chuckle troubled Nan. It seemed in some ridiculous fashion to bear out the silly things Bess had said about her and Walter earlier in the trip.

She forgot all about her perplexity a few moments later, however, when Walter helped Nan and Bess and Grace into the roomy tonneau of his big car, put Rhoda in the front seat, squeezed himself in behind the wheel, and started the motor.

"Well, how do you like Jacksonville, girls?" he called back to them as the machine glided easily forward. "As good as Tillbury, is it?" he added, with a glance at Nan and Bess.

"Not nearly," answered Bess loyally, although in her heart she knew that they could put two or three Tillburys in Jacksonville and never miss them.

The girls had known in a rather vague way that Jacksonville was a big place, but they had never expected to see anything like the bustling, thriving, wide-awake city they now drove through.

"Why, it is almost as noisy and crowded as New York," said Bess, wide-eyed, as Walter skilfully threaded his way through the heavy traffic. "And

we thought that was simply awful. Walter, please be careful."

"Don't worry," Walter sang back, grazing the rear wheel of another machine by the very narrowest margin possible. "If we did hit anything, we wouldn't be the ones to get hurt. This old bus could stop an express train."

"Maybe it could," retorted Bess. "But please try it some time when you are alone."

"Don't mind him," said Grace, with her quiet smile. "You know Walter never does all he says."

"Don't I though——" Walter was beginning, when his sister cut him off by turning eagerly to Nan and Bess.

"We're stopping at the Hampton," she said, the Hampton being one of the largest and most important of all the large and important hotels in Jacksonville. "Mother has engaged a perfectly lovely room for you girls. Rhoda and I room together. It is just for one night, you know, for we are going to take the train for Palm Beach to-morrow morning."

"Then," cried Nan, happily, "we shall have all the rest of to-day to do as we please in."

"What bliss," breathed Bess. "Walter, you are going to be a perfect angel, aren't you, and take us for a lovely long, long ride?"

"At your service, fair damsel," said Walter gallantly. "We were planning that anyway," he went

on to explain. "Mother and dad thought they would like to come along, too."

"More bliss," cried Bess, adding, as a cloud suddenly darkened her face: "I do hope we don't run across Linda any more. I declare, if I ever hear her say another word against you, Nancy Sherwood, I shall just have to kill her, that's all."

"Well, I must say I do wish she would stay home where she belongs," said Nan with a troubled frown. "Wherever we go she seems sure to turn up and spoil everything—or try to. I wonder if Cora is with her," she added. "I didn't see her at the dock."

"Humph, you don't think she would be at the dock, do you?" asked Walter, joining in the conversation. "Cora is a regular lady's maid to Linda now, so Grace says. She must be a funny kind of girl to stand for that sort of thing."

"Oh, Cora isn't so bad," said Nan. "I imagine she would like to break away from Linda, but she doesn't know just how to do it. Is this where we get out, Walter?" she asked, as the car slowed down before a building that looked more like a palace than a hotel.

"This is where we get out," replied Walter, jumping from his seat and running around to open the door for the girls. "Right this way, ladies. Follow me and you'll wear diamonds. Here, boy!" he spoke to a loitering colored boy who stood at the hotel entrance. "Carry these grips up to three-

twenty. The hat boxes, too. I suppose you want the hat boxes," he said, turning to the girls with a grin.

"Well, I should say!" replied Bess. "Neither Nan nor I would ever smile again if we should lose one of those hats. Would we, Nan?"

But Nan was looking behind her with startled eyes and never even heard her friend's question.

"Walter!" she cried, grasping the boy's arm and pointing excitedly down the street, "do you see those men over there getting out of that taxi? Quick! They are turning into that hotel."

"The little fat fellow and the long, thin man?" asked Walter, with a mystified line between his brows. "What about them? Friends of yours?"

"Take a good look at them," Nan cried, impatiently shaking his arm, while Grace and Rhoda looked on in amazement. "If you should see them again, I want you should know them."

CHAPTER XXI

THE BEGINNING OF ROMANCE

WALTER was frankly bewildered by this time. But he obediently took a long look at the short, fat man and the long, thin one. Then, as they disappeared around a corner, he turned back to Nan and led her toward the hotel entrance.

"Why, Nan, you are trembling," he said, as they followed the colored boy through a handsome courtyard and between rows of beautiful palm trees. "I never knew you to be like this before. What's the matter? If either of those men have bothered you," he added, glowering fiercely, "I'll wring their necks."

Nan gave a funny little hysterical laugh at this, and the laugh helped to steady her after the shock she had had at the unexpected reappearance of the two men.

"I don't want you to wring anybody's neck," she said, as they passed through another big door and stopped before an elevator. "Only please, Walter," she looked up at him appealingly, "watch out for them and let me know if you see them again. They are following us."

Walter's bewilderment was beginning to change to alarm, and he would have demanded to know all about the strange affair at once, had not the three girls come up to them at that minute.

On the ride up to the third floor of the hotel, where the room engaged for Nan and Bess was located, Grace reminded Nan of nothing so much as a human interrogation mark.

She fairly besieged the girl from Tillbury with questions, which would have been very embarrassing to poor Nan had not Rhoda interposed in her behalf.

"I don't suppose Nan wants to tell us about it now, Grace," she said. "Let's wait till we get upstairs."

Whereupon Grace was silenced temporarily. As for Bess, she was nearly as disturbed as her chum, and the journey up to the third floor seemed interminable.

They reached it, however, and the girls stepped out into a handsome corridor and were preceded by the velvet-footed bellboy past interminable closed doors, to be stopped finally before one particular door, closed like the rest, but evidently belonging, for the space of a day and night at least, to Nan and Bess.

Walter dismissed the boy with a tip, and, drawing a long key from his pocket, inserted it in the door. A moment more and they had stepped into a beauti-

ful room, all blue and gold, and with deep, lacily curtained windows and twin beds set over in one corner, with a small table and a reading lamp beside each one.

If the girls had not been used to handsome surroundings, the beauty of the room might have overwhelmed them a little. As it was, they were merely delighted.

Walter set the bags and hat boxes inside the door for them, and then turned to Nan, who was regarding her own particular bag with a disturbed little frown.

"I don't know what the matter is, Nan," he said in a low voice. "But if there is anything about those men you don't like I'll see that they don't worry you."

"Thank you, Walter. You're a dear," said Nan gratefully. "I'll tell you all about it just as soon as I can. And you really can help me, Walter, if you want to."

"I'll say I do," returned Walter boyishly. "See you later," and he went out quickly, closing the door behind him.

As Nan turned back into the room she found Bess regarding her with a mischievous little smile that said as plainly as words: "What did I tell you, Nan Sherwood?"

Nan felt unreasonably angry, but she was not given very much time to nurse the feeling. Grace

was upon her like a young whirlwind, dragging her over to one of the beds and demanding in no uncertain tone what she had to say in explanation of her queer conduct a few minutes before. Rhoda sat down on the other side of Nan, her face eagerly flushed.

"I never was so curious in my life, Nan Sherwood," she said. "Hurry up and tell us all about it."

Nan obediently went over the whole story. She told where she was carrying Mrs. Bragley's papers, and of her, Nan's, strange impression of being watched ever since the papers had come into her possession.

Then while Grace and Rhoda's eyes became wider and wider she told of the two men they had met on the boat and the tall one's evident desire to get into their cabin, for some reason known only to himself. And lastly she related how on that very morning they had found the mysterious men in suspicious proximity to their stateroom again and how the two had disappeared upon catching sight of the girls.

"Why, it's a regular mystery!" Grace cried eagerly, and Bess turned away from the mirror where she was fixing her hair and looked at her. "A real mystery!"

"You speak as if you liked it," she said impatiently. "It is lots of fun, I must say, to have Nan

so worked up and nervous all the time that you can't say boo to her without making her jump. If those old men don't get arrested or something pretty soon," she added, turning back to the mirror, "I'll have to do something desperate, that's all."

"Please don't," said Nan, with a laugh. "Enough is happening, goodness knows, without you starting something, too. Oh, come on, girls," she added, jumping up and flinging off her hat and coat. "I'll find out something definite about Mrs. Bragley's property before long, I hope, and then I'll be able to get rid of these horrid old papers. In the meantime, here we are in Jacksonville, and to-morrow we start for Palm Beach and everything is wonderful and lovely. Who's that?" A tap had sounded on the door and the girls started. "You open it, Bess. I have my hands full."

"Goodness! did you see me jump then?" Bess demanded grumpily. "I'll be as bad as Nan before you know it."

The visitor proved to be no one more formidable than Grace's mother, and as the girls were very fond of her, they greeted her with literally open arms.

Of course Grace had to recount to her all over again the story Nan had told her and Rhoda, and before she finished Mrs. Mason was looking rather grave.

"It certainly does look as though those papers of yours were important, Nan," she said. "That is evi-

dently what the rascals are after. I'll tell Mr. Mason, if you say so——"

"Oh, yes," Nan put in eagerly.

"And between us we ought to solve the mystery—if there is one."

"If there is one!" Grace exclaimed indignantly. "Well, I never!"

"Come, dear," Mrs. Mason merely said, "I know Nan and Bess must be a little tired after their trip, and they will just have time to rest for an hour and freshen up before lunch."

She led the reluctant Grace from the room. With a laughing word Rhoda followed them, and the chums were left alone.

That afternoon they went out right after lunch to see Jacksonville. The Mason's car was waiting for them outside as they stepped out upon the sidewalk in front of the hotel, but Nan was surprised to find Mr. Mason instead of the lawyer's son behind the wheel.

And then she saw Walter! He was in a beautiful, brand new little two-seater, which was shaped very much like a torpedo and came smartly close to the ground.

Nan, who was following her chums into the big car, stopped short at this strange apparition and uttered an exclamation of surprise. The others followed the direction of her glance, and Bess stood up excitedly.

"Hey, Walter! Where did you get the new car?" she asked. "Goodness, isn't it a beauty!"

"Do you like it?" asked the boy proudly, as the nose of the impertinent-looking little runabout stopped short within about two inches of the back of the big car. "Dad said he was afraid I would smash the jumbo, so he bought this little toy for me. Some class, isn't it?"

The girls were enthusiastic, and, indeed, it was an unusually handsome little car, and Nan ran around to get a closer look at it.

"Dad got it for me just in time," Walter said, patting the glossy side of his new steed.

"Why?" asked Nan innocently.

"Because there are too many in the party to ride in the big car, and we can have a much better time in the little fellow, I am sure. Come on, jump in."

Although she was eager to try the new car, Nan never wanted anything so little as she did to ride with Walter at that particular time.

But Mr. Mason had already started his motor, and there was nothing for Nan to do but to obey Walter and "jump in."

The little car had a surprisingly deep, wide tonneau, and Nan sank back in it luxuriously. She was conscious of the admiring scrutiny of spectators, and then Walter did a few skilful things to the machine and it started purringly forward after the big car,

both for all the world like a full-grown horse and its colt.

Nan sighed contentedly. If it had not been for Bess and the teasing she was sure to get when they were alone together in their room, she would have been completely happy.

Bess turned and waved to her, and the action, Nan knew as well as if her chum had put it into words, meant: "What did I tell you, Nan Sherwood?"

CHAPTER XXII

PALM BEACH AT LAST

THE tourists had a beautiful time, and everybody decided that if Palm Beach went ahead of Jacksonville it would have to be very wonderful indeed.

Jacksonville itself seemed to them very much like any busy, thriving city—except that there were more hotels. But when they came to the outskirts of the city they were charmed and wanted to go on forever.

Having lived all their lives in a temperate climate, the tropical beauty of the Florida country entranced them and they exclaimed again and again as beautiful new panoramas opened before them. The moss-hung live oaks especially drew exclamations of wonder from Nan.

"What a perfect picture they form," she said. "Oh, how I wish I could make sketches of them!"

"You'll see plenty to sketch when you get to Palm Beach," said Walter.

They visited the public parks and drove out to some of the suburbs. Everything interested the girls very much and they frankly said so.

"Everything is just about perfect," declared Bess.

"All but the darkeys!" sighed Rhoda. "I think it is all perfectly lovely but the negroes. There are so many of them, and they one and all look thoroughly shiftless."

"Oh, no, not shiftless," put in Mr. Mason. "They are just care-free."

"Humph! All right, then. Care-free. Just too lazy to care for anything at all, if they can get enough to eat, and I suppose that is not hard down here."

"They are quite all right when you get used to them," put in Mrs. Mason.

It was nearing dusk when they at last turned back toward the city, and it was then that Walter reminded Nan of her promise to tell him all about the mysterious men who had startled her so.

Nan obeyed, but, strangely enough, felt none of the uneasiness that she had felt on board the boat and in the hotel. There was something about the luxurious comfort of the car and Walter's reassuring presence that made her feel quite safe.

But Walter himself was anything but calm. He glowered fiercely at the road ahead of them and his hands clenched tightly on the wheel.

"It's a rotten shame!" he burst out, when Nan had finished her story. "If I once get hold of those fellows there won't be enough left of them to identify."

"But you will help me find Mrs. Bragley's property for her, won't you?" insisted Nan. "She said it was at a place called Sunny Slopes."

"Sunny Slopes, Sunny Slopes," Walter repeated thoughtfully. "The name sounds rather familiar to me. I tell you what I'll do," he said, turning to Nan with sudden decision. "Dad knows the names of nearly all the places through here. And if this Sunny Slopes is anywhere near Palm Beach we'll drive over in the car. How does that suit you?"

"Oh, fine," said Nan happily, adding as she gave him a demure glance: "Only we will drive over in the big car and take the girls along."

"What's the matter with this car?" asked Walter, turning to look at her. "I thought you liked it."

"I love it!" said Nan fervently, adding with a funny little smile that Walter did not understand: "I think on that particular trip, I would like to go in the big car."

The morning after their delightful ride about Jacksonville, they took the train for Palm Beach. They found to their disgust that Linda and her party were also on board.

"Goodness! I think Linda must be following us, too," Bess grumbled to Nan, looking blackly after their schoolmate as she walked haughtily down the car aisle. "To look at her you would think she owned the world at least. Oh, if I could only prove that it was she who damaged the heating plant up

at school, wouldn't it be a wonderful chance to get even with her?"

"I don't see why you should want to waste time getting even with her," Nan remarked calmly. "We have more interesting things to occupy our time."

"That's all very well for you," grumbled Bess, still feeling cross and injured by the unexpected appearance of Linda. "But *I* haven't any Walter."

Nan was just about to say something unpleasant when Walter himself hailed them. Grace and Rhoda were with him and all wore smiles to match the morning.

"Come on back," the boy invited. "Dad's got chairs for the whole crowd where we can get the finest view. But he said we had better grab 'em quick, because there's no knowing how long they will last in this crowd."

So the girls followed him to the observation car and would very probably have forgotten all about Linda, had not the girl herself made that impossible.

It was hot, and there were few people in the car, but Linda and one of the ladies in her party walked up and down, looking occasionally out of the windows, as if their energy was inexhaustible.

That would not have been so bad, had not Linda chosen to ignore the girls so pointedly, brushing past with her head held in the air and a manner which said very plainly, "Who are those little specks of

dust over there? Know them? Why, of course not!" Finally Bess felt as though she could not stand it a moment longer.

"She's doing it on purpose, the horrid thing," Bess fumed to Nan. "If she doesn't stop pretty soon, I'll give her a push and topple her over. She'll not look so haughty then, I fancy."

Perhaps it was just as well for all concerned that Linda stopped her bad-mannered performance shortly after that, for Bess could not have been restrained much longer. With this annoyance removed, they had opportunity to enjoy the ride to the full.

Mr. Mason proved a very interesting companion, for he knew the names of the places they passed and told the girls funny stories about things that had happened in each one of them until they were tired out from the laughter.

"I never knew there were so many resorts in the world," sighed Nan, leaning back lazily in her chair. "The only place I really ever connected with Florida was Palm Beach. But it seems that is only one of about a million."

"Hardly that," laughed Mr. Mason. "It is true there are a great many resorts in Florida, but the most beautiful and famous of them is Palm Beach."

"Mr. Mason," spoke up Bess, with a wicked little look at Nan, "is it true that most of the people who go to Palm Beach are either bald-headed millionaires

or fussy women who just go there to show off their clothes?"

Mr. Mason laughed heartily at this, and the rest of his family joined in, while Nan shot a reproachful glance at her chum.

"No, my dear," said the gentleman finally, a humorous twist in the corners of his mouth. "I can't say that all the guests at Palm Beach are of the particular varieties you have mentioned. There are bald-headed millionaires, of course, and plenty of fussy, over-dressed women, but the people that I have mostly met in the hotels have struck me as being nice folks, very much like ourselves——"

"Stop handing yourself bouquets, Dad," Walter broke in, with a chuckle.

"I included the whole family," said Mr. Mason gravely. "The millionaires," he went on, "don't come to the hotels as a rule. They build themselves beautiful bungalows along the shore and take their recreation mostly in private clubs."

"Oh, dear! I think that's horrid," pouted Bess. "That's one of the things I came for especially. I wanted to see a dozen real live millionaires all in one spot."

"You shall see plenty of millionaires," promised Mr. Mason. "Although we won't guarantee to have them all in one spot."

A few hours later the tide of passengers flowed from the train at Palm Beach and the girls, borne

along with the crowd, looked about them eagerly.

They had heard a great deal about the beauty of this famous winter resort, but they realized in that one swift glance that nothing they had ever heard had half done it justice.

"Is that a hotel over there?" asked Nan of Grace, as they allowed themselves to be swept on by the merry crowd. Bess and Rhoda were coming slowly along behind them. "That immense yellow building with the green blinds?"

"Yes, that's the Royal Poinciana," answered Grace. "Where we are going to stay, you know."

"Oh, are we?" asked Nan faintly, as she gazed up at the Royal Poinciana Hotel, which was six stories in height and seemed to cover several acres of ground. "Goodness, it seems as if the whole world ought to be able to get in there. And what's that?" she went on, pointing to another yellow building with green blinds. "Its twin?"

"Yes. They call it The Breakers," returned Grace, rather enjoying her new rôle of guide. "It isn't quite as large as the Royal Poinciana, but dad says it is just as good."

Before long they reached the hotel and they waited while Walter, Bess, Rhoda and Mr. and Mrs. Mason came puffing up to them, warm from the heat of the afternoon sun.

"Come ahead, folks," said Mr. Mason, engineering his flock up the steps of the hotel to the porch.

"Let's get cooled and brushed up a bit, and then we can come out and see the sights. This is the biggest crowd I have ever found here," he added, as they entered the darkened, cool lobby of the hotel with a conscious sigh of relief, "and that is saying a good deal."

CHAPTER XXIII

A TROPICAL PARADISE

THE signing of the hotel register was not an easy task, for there were many other guests waiting to do the same thing. Mr. Mason finally managed it, however, and he and his rather large family were whirled up in a roomy elevator to the fifth floor and were shown to their rooms by a well-mannered and friendly bellboy.

Bess and Nan were to room together and Grace and Rhoda had a room right off theirs, connected by a door, so that it was really as if the girls were all in one room.

"Come down on the porch when you are ready, girls," said Walter, just before he disappeared into his own room, "and we'll wander around and see the sights."

Nan and Bess were delighted with their room, for it was large and airy and commanded a beautiful view of Lake Worth, upon which the Royal Poinciana Hotel is situated. Grace's and Rhoda's room also faced the lake.

"Oh, girls, look at all the boats!" squealed Bess,

dancing delightedly up and down before one of the windows. "They are so thick you can hardly see any water between them."

"The *Bargain Rush* is down there somewhere," said Grace, as she and Nan ran across the room to peek over Bess's shoulder. "Dad made an awful fuss about having it shipped all the way, but Walter said he didn't want to come if he couldn't have it."

"But, Grace, this is the first word you have said about the *Bargain Rush,*" said Bess reproachfully. "And you know just how unhappy we'd be if we did not have a boat down here."

"I've heard about Lake Worth being such a beautiful harbor for the pleasure boats of the Palm Beach tourists," said Rhoda happily, "but I never imagined it was half so beautiful."

"But where is the ocean?" asked Bess, as they turned from the window and began a hurried "freshening process." "I declare, I'm all mixed up."

"The ocean is in back of us, silly," Nan informed her. "Didn't you notice the beautiful beach down there as we came along? There were people in bathing, too. Oh, don't I wish I could go in myself this very minute. Just think of it—surf bathing in February!"

"Br-r-r, stop it," commanded Bess with a shiver. "You make me chilly."

They were ready to see the sights in a surprisingly short time, and Bess noticed as they stepped out into

the corridor that Nan locked the door very carefully and slipped the key into her pocket.

"You aren't worrying about those men yet, are you?" she asked.

"No-o," said Nan a little doubtfully. "But it is always just as well to be on the safe side."

Together with other girls and boys and men and women, all, like themselves, on pleasure bent, the girls made their way down to the lobby of the great hotel. Seeing nothing of Walter there, they rather timidly stepped out upon the veranda.

The size of it made them gasp, and for a moment they just stood staring stupidly at the seemingly endless vista of chairs and tables and people —Nan and the others were sure there were millions of people.

They might have stood there forever, had not Nan become suddenly aware of the admiring glances of several of the crowd that thronged the piazza. For the four modishly dressed girls formed a very pretty and striking picture.

"Let's sit down or something—everybody is staring at us," she whispered to Rhoda, but at that moment Rhoda caught sight of Walter and waved a commanding hand.

"So here you are," said the boy, his face lighting up with pleasure at the unexpected sight of the girls. "Right this way, ladies. Say," he added, as they started down the steps together, "you're looking

great, girls. It isn't every fellow who has the chance to escort four pippins at Palm Beach."

"Pippins!" repeated Grace emphatically, while the others giggled. "You know that's vulgar, Walter."

"Vulgar or not, it's the truth," said Walter cheerfully. "Isn't this some garden?" he went on.

The Royal Poinciana Hotel was set in a tropical paradise of gorgeous flowers and shrubs and trees, the beauty of which no one who has not seen it can imagine.

One tree in particular caught Nan's eye and she pointed it out eagerly.

"Look at that gorgeous thing," she cried. "What is it, Walter—a shrub or a tree or a flower, or a mixture of all of them?"

"That's the Royal Poinciana tree," explained Walter. "It is a beauty, isn't it? The hotel is named for the tree, you know."

They wandered on again, exclaiming at every step, so happy and excited that more than one person in passing turned to look after them with an indulgent smile.

There were the golf links between the two hotels, and men who "looked old enough to know better," to quote Bess, were wandering over the velvet green sward with faithful caddies trailing along in the rear.

"I don't see what possible fun they can find in just batting a foolish little ball about," was Nan's

comment, and Rhoda turned to her with a laugh.

"About the same pleasure that you find in batting a foolish little tennis ball about," she said, and Nan caught her up indignantly.

"But that's different!" she said, and they laughed at her.

"Look!" cried Grace, a moment later, pointing to some beautiful level tennis courts where several animated sets of singles were in progress. "You can't say we don't give you every kind of amusement here, Nan."

"It's wonderful," sighed Nan happily. "I'm glad now that I thought to pack my racket before I started. My, how I would like to be out there now." For Nan was a tennis enthusiast, and really could play the game well.

"I'll play you a game to-morrow morning," challenged Walter, and she took him up eagerly.

"Any time you say," she laughed. "And I'll take the court with the sun in my eyes!"

They must have wandered on for a long time, for the sun was getting low when they finally turned to go back. They had passed "cottages" which must have cost their owners a small fortune to build and several small fortunes to maintain.

Walter pointed out to them a club of millionaires whose membership was something like two hundred, with three hundred more prospective members on the waiting list.

"Goodness!" exclaimed Bess, "I think I shall have to break in there some time. Think of seeing two hundred millionaires all in one place, instead of only a dozen!"

"If you break in, Bess, you may get into trouble," said Walter, with a twinkle in his eye. "What if several of the millionaires proposed to you at once? You wouldn't know which one to take, you know you wouldn't."

"Then I wouldn't take any of them," announced the girl from Tillbury promptly.

"What, throw a real millionaire overboard?" and Walter gave a pretended gasp.

"Of course. A millionaire might be nice to look at and very hateful to live with," and Bess flung back her head as if that settled it.

"Oh, let's give the millionaires a rest," put in Rhoda. "I know what I'd like."

"What?" came from several of the others.

"A horseback ride down there on the beach."

"Nothing easier," said Walter. "When do you want to go, now? If you do, I'll get you a horse—over at the stand yonder."

"Will you go?" questioned the girl from Rose Ranch, turning to her school chums.

"Hadn't we better wait until we are a little better acquainted?" questioned Nan.

"All right. I suppose it's a bit hot to-day anyway," said Rhoda.

"I guess you miss the riding you used to do on the ranch," said Grace.

"I certainly do. Not but what this is very nice for a change."

It was late when they reached the hotel at last, and the girls began to realize for the first time that they were tired.

"See you to-night," whispered Walter to Nan, as Grace, Bess and Rhoda disappeared into the lobby. "And don't forget that tennis engagement for to-morrow. Ten o'clock sharp."

CHAPTER XXIV

NAN IS FRIGHTENED

NAN played tennis with Walter the next day, and what is more, she beat him, four out of six. She declared later that it must have been either pure luck, or the fact that Walter was so dazed with surprise at finding that it was possible for a girl to beat him that he had given her two sets before he had recovered from the shock.

Be that as it may, the fact remained that Nan had to work her hardest to wrest a set from him after that, and felt very lucky if she managed to win one out of three.

On the other hand, Walter had to work his hardest to keep Nan from making a "fool" of him and winning everything. Consequently his admiration for the girl from Tillbury rose at least ten points.

The other girls were interested in the game also, although of the three, Grace was by far the best player. Lazy Bess much preferred reading a magazine on the immense piazza of the hotel to chasing a ball around in the hot sun.

There were so many wonderful things to occupy

their attention that a week flew by before they knew it. Almost without sensing it, the girls had drifted into the routine of gay activities that prevailed at the resort.

There was usually a brisk walk before breakfast. That is, there was for Nan, Rhoda, Grace and Walter. Bess was often too tired after the gaiety of the day before to get up before breakfast to take anything so uninteresting as a walk.

Then came breakfast, an event in itself, for the food was delicious, especially to such ravenous appetites as the girls and Walter brought back to it, and the beautiful dining-room of the hotel was a treat to the eye.

After breakfast the majority of the guests sallied forth to the delights of motoring or sailing or tennis, while the others either lingered on the porch or sauntered over to the golf links to play a game of golf, or, if anglers, went out on a fishing excursion.

The golf course was between the two hotels, so that the players not only furnished amusement for themselves but for all those who cared to watch them.

Later in the morning, somewhere between eleven o'clock and noon, was the hour for bathing. Then all who cared to go in the water made a dash for the ocean, and had a cool, invigorating plunge before luncheon. This was the hour that Nan liked best of all.

Later in the afternoon, one could either go over to the cocoanut grove for afternoon tea and a dance or two or take what was in many cases a much-needed rest.

At night the girls loved to have dinner in the Garden Grill, for the place itself was a romantic dream of beauty with its palm trees and boxes of shrubs. And the music—the music carried them far away from the present on golden wings of melody and made them forget that there was anything sordid or unpleasant in all the world.

Perhaps the evening was the time that most of the Palm Beach visitors lived for. Then came the chance to display beautiful gowns and flashing jewels of fabulous worth.

There was a glamor about the lights and music and gowns and jewels that quite went to wealth-loving Bess's head, and even made steady Rhoda's heart beat faster and eyes shine brighter.

As for Nan and Grace—they were just in their element, and showed it.

Of course they met Linda Riggs occasionally. It would have been impossible for them not to have done so. But as the disagreeable girl continued consistently to ignore them, the chums just as consistently adopted the same attitude.

They met several other girls of about their own age, and two of these girls had their brothers with them, and these youths had two chums along—so

none of the girls wanted for partners when it came to dancing or playing tennis. In fact, sometimes they had "more partners than were really needed," as Bess put it.

"But you are not going to complain because you have enough partners, are you?" queried Grace.

"Oh, no, indeed," cried Bess. "I am glad there are more boys here. Imagine Walter having to take care of all of us."

One day all of them went for a horseback ride. This put Rhoda in her element, and, seated on a fine, spirited steed, the girl from Rose Ranch gave as fine an exhibition of horsemanship as had been seen at Palm Beach for a long time.

"Your chum rides like a regular western girl," said one of the boys present, to Nan.

"And that is just what she is," answered Nan. "And one of the best girls in the world besides."

"I don't doubt it. I wish I could ride half as well."

"Maybe Rhoda will give you lessons."

"No such luck, I'm afraid," said the boy. "But I'll ask her anyway," and he did, with the result that he and Rhoda went out half a dozen times, and the girl from Rose Ranch taught him many of her best riding tricks.

"He's a splendid fellow, Will Halliday is," said Rhoda to Nan. "He likes outdoor life—and that's the best there is."

"Does he come from out West?"

"The middle West—Iowa."

"You are making a good rider of him, Rhoda."

"Well, I like somebody who takes a real interest in a horse," answered the girl from Rose Ranch.

One night in the ballroom, Rhoda espied Linda across the room and with her was a girl who looked familiar. She called Nan's attention to the fact.

"Why, yes," said Nan with a puzzled frown. "It looks like—why, Rhoda, it is——"

"Cora Courtney!" finished Rhoda in a "what-will-happen next" tone of voice.

"Let's go over and make sure," said Nan, and they started to skirt the floor, hugging the wall to escape the dancers, for the floor was already crowded with them. But when they reached the spot where Linda and her companion had been, the latter were gone, and, try as they would, the girls could not find them.

"It seems awfully strange," said Nan as they disappointedly found their way back to their seats, "that if the girl was really Cora we haven't seen her before."

They told Bess and Grace about it later, and they agreed that the incident looked queer, to say the least. However, they had so many things to think about in the days that followed, that Linda slipped entirely from their minds.

One morning the girls decided to forego their

usual game of tennis and take an early dip instead. Nan had complained of an ache in the muscles of her right arm, and as the trouble almost undoubtedly came from overstrain, Walter had insisted that she take "a day off."

The weather had seemed uncomfortably warm at the hotel, but when they reached the beach the girls were surprised to find that they felt chilly.

"Goodness!" said Bess with a shiver, "I think I will let you girls go in and I'll stay here. Experience has taught me that the beautiful green ocean about these parts isn't always as balmy and warm as it's reported to be."

"No, you don't," said Nan decidedly. "You know very well it spoils all the fun if one of us backs out. Come on, Rhoda, you take the other arm. One—two—three—go!" and Bess was hurried, half laughing and half angry and wholly protesting, down to the water's edge and promptly ducked under a foam-tipped, hungry, man-eating wave.

She came out on the other side and struck out manfully, puffing and steaming like a young whale.

The girls watched her laughingly for a minute, then plunged in after her.

"My, the water is cold," sputtered Grace, as the girls struck out abreast with long, beautifully even strokes. "Poor Bess! I don't know but what she had the right idea after all."

The hour being so early, the girls had that par-

ticular portion of Old Man Ocean almost to themselves. There were a few early bathers, however, and among these was a man with a long, thin face and a mouth that was set in a hard, straight line.

Nan, doing the crawl with her head under water, came up directly in front of this unpleasant-looking person and was so startled and surprised in consequence that she almost forgot to keep herself afloat.

Her paralysis remained only a moment, however, and in a flash of time she was swimming back toward her companions.

As for the man, having given Nan a careful look, he suddenly made a dash for the shore and one of the bathhouses.

"I reckon this is my chance," he said, as he got into his clothing with all speed. "I'll do the trick while she is in bathing."

Nan was almost out of breath when she reached her chums.

"Listen to me!" she gasped. "I've got to get up to the hotel—and at once!"

"Nan Sherwood, is it serious this time, or is this only another of your attacks?" asked Bess impatiently. "Here you are the one who dragged us into the water at this early hour, and now you want to spoil all the fun by breaking up the party. For goodness' sake, listen to reason," she wailed, as Nan, with a determined shake of her red-capped head, started in toward shore.

"Haven't time," she flung back.

"You can at least tell us what the matter is," called Grace, as reluctant as Bess to cut short the fun.

"Haven't time," Nan repeated, half way in to shore now.

Bess and Grace paddled the water and looked at each other helplessly.

"Don't you think we had better go, too?" asked Rhoda uncertainly.

"No, I don't," was Bess's cross answer. "Nan's acting awfully funny these days, anyway. I think she has another secret."

As for Nan, she did not wait to see whether the girls were following her or not, but ran posthaste to her bathhouse, where she exchanged her bathing suit for more formal attire. Then she hurried on to the hotel.

She had not seen this man since his arrival at Palm Beach, and the sudden appearance of his face so close to hers in the water had startled her horribly. Her first thought had been of the documents in her suitcase and her one desire to get to them as soon as possible.

"Oh, what a fool I was not to give those papers to Mr. Mason, or have them placed in the hotel safe," she scolded to herself. She called herself several kinds of a goose as she ran down the quiet corridor to her room. As she stood before the door

a slight noise within sent her heart suddenly into her mouth, and she hesitated before turning the knob.

Then, with desperate courage, she flung the door wide and stepped into the room. Before her bed a tall, thin man was standing, and on the bed was a bag, her bag, partly open, with the contents showing!

In a moment her fear changed to flaming indignation, and she sprang forward, flinging herself before the bag and pushing the man away from her with furious, impotent little fists.

"You little imp!" the fellow snarled, catching her wrists and holding them in an iron grip. "You just dare make a noise, and I'll show you who's boss. You little——"

"Nan! Oh, Nan, what's the matter?"

The voice held a frightened note, and its owner was evidently running along the corridor toward Nan's open door. The man said something under his breath, released Nan's wrists, and darted toward the window.

Nan, conscious of a stabbing pain in her wrists, followed him, but not in time to stop his flight. She saw him disappear down the fire escape and then, with a little stifled sob, turned back into the room and found herself face to face with her startled chums.

"Nan! you look like a ghost," cried Bess, flinging

an arm about the girl and drawing her to the bed.

"We thought we heard a man's voice," added Rhoda, staring with fascinated eyes from Nan to the half-opened bag on the bed.

Grace was plainly frightened. "Nan! was that man here?"

"Yes," said Nan faintly. "He was here and he—oh, girls, it was dreadful! I can't talk about it." And she broke down with a sob and buried her head on Bess's shoulder.

CHAPTER XXV

MOONLIGHT

When Nan told her story to the Masons a little later they were not only indignant but very genuinely worried. Walter declared that he would "catch that man and wring his neck before the day was up," which boast, though extremely extravagant, brought strange comfort to Nan, shocked as she had been by the events of the morning.

Mr. Mason wanted to shadow the man, but Nan begged him not to do that until after they had had a chance to look up Mrs. Bragley's property for her and see what it was worth.

"If that's the way you feel," Mr. Mason decided sympathetically, "it seems to me the best thing to do is to get to Sunny Slopes as soon as possible, take a look at this land, and employ an attorney, if need be, to be sure her title is clear. Then if this man is illegally trying to wrest the land from its rightful owner, we will employ a detective and see that the fellow is brought to justice. I want to lift the load from these young shoulders," he said, looking down at Nan with the nice smile that made everybody like

him. "They are too young to carry the troubles of other people yet."

Nan smiled up at him gratefully, and perhaps the interview might have ended there had Walter allowed it to. But Walter was still tremendously worried about Nan.

"But Dad," he said, turning to his father accusingly, "you certainly can't mean that you are going to let that man wander around loose so that he can worry Nan all he wants to. Why, this is four or five times already that he has nearly frightened her to death. Why," he continued, waxing more excited as he thought about it and glaring at the anxious group of people as though it were in some way all their fault, "he isn't going to stop when he so nearly got what he wanted to-day. He may come back again to-night——"

"That is very unlikely," Mr. Mason broke in, in a cheerful, matter-of-fact tone. "He knows that we are on our guard now. "For all he can tell, we may have detectives in every corridor and he will be very careful how he ventures near Nan's room to-night. No, he will try some other way since this one has failed. And in a day or two we will motor down to Sunny Slopes and relieve Nan's mind about this woman's property."

In spite of Mr. Mason's very reasonable conviction that the man would not return to Nan's room, the girls were nervous that night, especially Bess,

and they were all glad when the sun, creeping in through the window, announced that another beautiful day had begun.

"Goodness!" said Bess, stretching fretfully, "if this keeps up much longer, Nan Sherwood, I'll just be a wreck, that's all."

"Get your cold water plunge and you will feel better," said Nan, at which practical suggestion Bess merely grunted.

They were to play a tennis match that day, Rhoda and Walter against Nan and Grace, and naturally they all had set their hearts upon winning. Bess had begged off on the ground that it was too warm to play.

It was a glorious morning for the sport, sunshiny and clear, yet cool, and the girls forgot their restless night as they stepped out upon the court.

It was not till they started to "warm up" and Nan wound up for her usual swift serve that they had an inkling of the thing that was to spoil the fun for that morning, at least.

Nan struck weakly at the ball, which landed ignominiously in the net and then dropped her racket with a little cry of pain. The girls and Walter ran to her anxiously, Walter jumping the net and scooping up the ball as he came.

"What is the matter, Nan Sherwood?" Bess wanted to know. "That's the funniest ball I ever saw you serve."

"It's my wrist," said Nan apologetically. "It turned just at the wrong minute. I don't seem to have any power in it."

"Let me see," Walter demanded masterfully, and as he held her little wrist in his hand Nan noticed that it was red and swollen.

"Oh-h!" she said impulsively, "that must be where the man grabbed me so tight yesterday. I'm dreadfully sorry to spoil your game," she added, thinking, as always, more of every one else than of herself.

"Hang the old game," said Walter explosively. "We can play that any time. But if I could get my hands on that—that——"

"Don't say it," begged Nan, with a little laugh. "You mustn't talk about people behind their backs, you know."

"But now our game is spoiled, and we have a whole long morning on our hands," wailed Grace. "I wish I had slept a couple of hours longer."

"I tell you what we'll do," said Walter, with sudden inspiration. "We'll take some fishing tackle—Grace and I have enough to go round—and go out in the little old *Bargain Rush* to a place I know of where the fish just come trotting up begging to be caught. How about it, girls? Are you on?"

It seemed that they were, enthusiastically so, and half an hour later Grace was declaring that she was sorry about poor Nan's wrist, of course, but if this wasn't better than playing a hot game of tennis and

probably getting beaten, her name wasn't Grace Mason, that's all.

Walter was right about the fish—they seemed to enjoy being caught, and when, almost at noon time, they came back to the hotel with Walter bringing up the rear with the result of the morning's sport proudly displayed, strangers followed them with envious eyes and people they knew stopped them to ask where they had found the fish.

As for Nan, she tried hard to enter into the old round of gaieties with her usual enthusiasm, for she knew that to show how worried she was would only spoil the fun of her friends. But to herself she acknowledged that she would not really be able to enjoy anything again until the mystery of those dangerous papers in her bag was finally cleared up and she was free from espionage once more.

Walter seemed to be the only one who really understood her state of mind and when she pleaded a headache that afternoon and broke an engagement with the girls to go to the cocoanut grove for tea, it was Walter who silenced their protests and took her himself up to her room.

"I'm awfully sorry about this," he said, taking the wrist, which had been rubbed with liniment and neatly bandaged by Mrs. Mason, in one of his sunburned hands and patting it awkwardly. "Does it ache very much now?"

"N—no. It doesn't ache at all," said Nan, add-

ing quickly to cover her confusion as she drew her hand away, "I think you had better go down to the girls now, Walter. They will think you've deserted them."

"Oh, all right," said Walter, and perhaps it was only Nan's imagination that made her think he looked hurt. "Be sure and save the first two dances for me to-night."

He went out quietly, and for a long time after he had gone Nan stood looking at the closed door. Then her glance dropped to her bandaged wrist and she smiled a little.

"Boys are so funny," she murmured—to no one in particular.

There was a big dance that night, and when the time came to dress Nan still further incensed the girls by refusing to dress.

"How would I look in an evening dress and—this thing?" she asked, holding up her bandaged wrist.

"No one ever would look at your wrist when your face is along, Nan Sherwood," said Rhoda, at which Nan laughed but still remained firm.

"Oh, well," said Bess, flouncing over to her closet and taking out a pretty white net and blue satin dress, "I suppose you will have your own way, Nan. But one way or another, that old Mrs. Bragley and her miserable papers have just spoiled our trip. I wish she was in Jericho!"

"It was Guinea last time," Nan laughed at her.

Since Nan refused to dance that night, Walter also refused. Try as she might, Nan could not get him to alter his decision, and finally gave up the attempt in despair.

"Grace and Bess will be furious," she said.

"Let them," he answered recklessly. "There are plenty of other fellows around. See that moon over there? Say, Nan, I have a bully idea."

They were standing in one corner of the veranda of the Royal Poinciana. The veranda looked strangely deserted that night, the dance being at its height in the ballroom within, and it being still a little early for the inevitable drifting of couples from the heat of the ballroom to the cool breezes of the porch.

"An idea?" asked Nan, feeling adventurous herself. "Tell me."

"Back there somewhere the *Bargain Rush* is waiting," said Walter, his voice boyishly eager. "Since we can't dance, we might as well 'putt.' And—it seems too bad to waste that moon."

Nan thought so, too, and a moment later they were running hand in hand through the garden to the spot where the *Bargain Rush* waited. They scrambled on board, Walter started the engine, and they drifted out into the magic stillness of the night.

"Now tell me," said Walter after a while, his eyes shifting from the moonlit waters of the lake to Nan where she sat curled up in one of the chairs, gazing

dreamily out over the shadowy water, "isn't this better than dancing?"

"It's awfully nice," admitted Nan.

"I get so tired of the hot ballroom, and the bright lights," went on the boy, as he bent over the engine, to see that it was running properly.

"Well, I get tired of the lights myself, Walter."

"And those flashing jewels! Why will some of the women load themselves with so much jewelry?"

"I'm sure I don't know. I think too much jewelry is horrid."

"I suppose some folks think that is the one way to let others know that they have money."

Nan drew a deep breath. "Look at the moon, Walter, isn't it simply wonderful?"

"Sure is. And I think——"

Walter came to a sudden stop. Another motor boat had loomed up, running dangerously close to the *Bargain Rush.*

"Hi, keep away from there!" called out the boy.

"They'll run into us!" exclaimed Nan, in sudden alarm.

"Don't get scared, sonny!" sang out a man in the other motor boat and then he suddenly veered out of the way, but with only an inch or two to spare.

"The great big clown!" burst out Walter, in just anger. "He did that just to give us a scare."

"It was no way to do," said Nan. She was not a little shaken by the unexpected happening.

"I hope he runs into a tree, or a rock, or something."

"There he goes, along the other shore of the lake," said Nan, a few seconds later. "See, I think he is trying to scare the folks in that other motor boat."

"He's either crazy or a fool," murmured Walter.

The unknown motorist was evidently amusing himself at the expense of those less daring than himself, and he raced up and down the lake several times. But soon a larger motor boat put out and bore down upon him.

"We've been laying for you," said a man who was evidently an official. "You'll not try any more of those tricks."

"That's right—place him under arrest," said another man, one who had come close to suffering a collision. "I'll make a charge against him."

"I was only having a little fun," whined the man who had been racing around.

"You can tell your story at the police station," was the answer. And then the fellow was placed under arrest.

Nan and Walter continued their ride in the moonlight, and soon the unpleasant incident was forgotten. They talked of their good times at Palm Beach, and then the youth referred to what Nan proposed to do for Mrs. Bragley.

"Nan, I'm awfully sorry you are so worried about those old property papers," remarked Walter pres-

ently. "Why don't you turn them over to my dad?"

"I thought you'd say that, Walter," she returned. "I've been expecting it. Why don't I? Well, to tell the truth, I don't know. I—I guess I am a little headstrong about it."

"Headstrong?" he repeated, plainly puzzled.

"Yes. You see Bess and the others think I am so—so—well, so scared I can't keep them in my possession. Well," Nan drew a deep breath, "I *am* scared. But, just the same, I'm not so scared as all that—and I'm going to prove it to them, so there!"

Walter gazed at her in open admiration for a moment.

"Nan, you're a brick!" he cried.

CHAPTER XXVI

WORTH A FORTUNE

Mr. Mason, by inquiry, had found out that the district known as Sunny Slopes was about sixty miles from Palm Beach, and the next morning they set off by motor for the place, Mrs. Mason having declared to her husband the night before that "it was of no use to put the thing off any longer. The girl's nerves were all on edge over that queer widow's mysterious papers. He may not have noticed it, but she had been watching Nan very closely."

So it came about that a big machine, carrying Mr. and Mrs. Mason, Nan and Bess and Rhoda, and enough luggage to last them at a hotel for a few days, and a torpedo-shaped little car bearing Walter and Grace set out bright and early to make the trip to Sunny Slopes.

Walter had taken it for granted that Nan would ride with him, and had seemed inclined to sulk when she decidedly refused. For Nan had taken herself very severely to task when she had reached her room the night before. She had broken her rule never to go anywhere with Walter unless the girls were

along, and she would never, never do it again. She was particularly hard on herself to-day—and on poor Walter—because of the fact that she had enjoyed that dreamlike sail over the moonlight waters of Lake Worth more than she had ever enjoyed anything before.

So Walter, coming behind the big machine with Grace, sulked, and Grace scolded because, in his preoccupation, he nearly ran her and himself into a ditch.

Their route lay over the lake to West Palm Beach and then along a beautiful highway lined on either side with gorgeous palms.

"I don't wonder the place is called Palm Beach," remarked Rhoda. "I never dreamed of seeing so many fine palm trees before."

They had made careful inquiries concerning the route, and once the houses and bungalows were left behind they "hit it up" to a very respectable rate of speed. The roads, for the most part, were very good, and the only spots covered where they had to be careful were where there had been washouts.

"It is certainly a pretty landscape," remarked Grace, as they sped past one settlement after another. "I don't wonder that you said you'd like to make sketches, Nan."

"But I haven't made any yet," was Nan's answer, with a slight shrug of the shoulders.

They reached Sunny Slopes about noon, and de-

cided—at least their ravenous appetites decided for them—that they had better have something to eat before they inquired further into the mystery of Mrs. Bragley's papers.

Nan was the only one who seemed very much excited, and the others did not notice that the girl scarcely touched her lunch. It seemed an age to her before the meal was finished and Mr. Mason declared that they were ready to make their investigations.

Nan and her friends would have been very much surprised had they known that they were being followed on their trip to Sunny Slopes, yet such was a fact. The two men who had tried so hard to gain possession of Sarah Bragley's documents were growing desperate.

"We've got to do something and do it quick," snapped the tall, thin man. "Do you hear me?"

"I certainly do," growled the other.

"If we fail we won't get a cent of the cash that was promised to us."

"I know that, too," answered the short man, and scowled deeply.

Mr. Mason had once, in his less affluent days, been a real estate broker himself, and so pooh-poohed his wife's suggestion that he get some one who knew the country to direct them.

"My dear," he said, "if this Mrs. Bragley has any property around here, I'll find it."

He had, with Nan's consent, examined the documents the widow had given her and had seemed, to Nan's eager eyes, to have been considerably impressed by them.

So now as they crowded out of the restaurant—it was the first one they had come to, and they had been too hungry to argue about its elegance or lack of it—and climbed into the cars again, Nan could hardly keep still in her eagerness to know the truth at once.

They passed down a short business street, and then, making a turn, came out on a broad country road.

"Sunny Slopes begins about a mile from here," said Mr. Mason. "It covers quite a bit of territory, I am told. While one end is quite barren, the other end is excellent for orange growing and is covered with bearing trees."

"Oh, dear, I hope Mrs. Bragley's end is the orange-growing end!" cried Nan.

"Don't be too much disappointed if it isn't," said Mrs. Mason kindly.

Suddenly Bess, who had been laughing and talking with Rhoda about school affairs, gave a little bounce and cried out excitedly:

"Look there! Isn't that an orange grove?"

"It surely is," Mr. Mason called back to her, adding in a voice that showed his rising excitement: "Your widow's property ought to be somewhere in

here, Nan. I think I'll stop the car and we can go forward on foot."

"Oh!" said Nan softly, as, a moment later, she jumped out into the road. "I never saw an orange grove before. Isn't it wonderful!"

"Goodness!" said Bess, as Grace and Walter drew up behind the big car and ran around and joined them, "it looks as if they had all been drawn after the same pattern—the trees, I mean. Did you ever see anything so symmetrical in all your life?"

It was the first time any of them, except the Masons, had been close to an orange grove, and they all went forward for a closer look at it. The grove was set quite a way back from the road and seemed to cover many acres of ground, stretching symmetrically back as far as the eye could see.

The orange trees were not tall, and were shaped very much like the little toy trees the children use to build their landscape gardens—broad at the bottom and tapering up almost to a point at the top.

From his examination of the documents carried by Nan, Mr. Mason had jotted down a number of facts and figures. Now the lawyer walked forward slowly and presently examined a number of stone markers he found set in the ground. Then he walked to a side road and read the signs thereon. A smile of satisfaction crossed his face.

Nan, standing close to Mr. Mason, touched his arm timidly.

"Is this Mrs. Bragley's property?" she asked in an awed tone.

"These are most certainly the orange groves mentioned in her documents," he said gravely. "How much of it she owns will have to be determined by an attorney. But I guess," he added, looking down at Nan with a kindly smile, "that the property she holds here is worth a tidy sum, several thousand dollars at least. Of course the orange grove itself is worth a fortune."

"I'm so glad!" cried Nan happily. "I just can't wait to let poor Mrs. Bragley know about it."

"Well, I must say," said Bess, "that this is the first time I've really thought those old papers were worth anything, Nan. Perhaps now we can get rid of them so we won't have any more trouble."

"Then there was a real reason for those men shadowing Nan," said Walter, adding with an unusually fierce scowl: "If they turn up again, I *will* kill them, that's all, even if it lands me in jail."

"My, aren't we dangerous," said Nan, laughing at him.

Nan never afterward knew just how it happened, but some way or other, among the orange trees, she managed to get separated from the rest of the party. She was so engrossed with happy thoughts of the success of her plan to help Mrs. Bragley and so absorbed in imagining the woman's surprise and joy at the news she was about to receive that it was some

time before she woke up to the fact that she was alone.

The predicament—if indeed it was one—did not particularly worry her, for she knew that she could find her way back to the road easily enough and that there was no possibility in the world of her becoming really lost.

As she stood reveling in the tropical beauty of the scene and smiling happily to herself, a thought suddenly flashed through her mind that banished the smile from her lips and brought an anxious frown to her brow.

"I've left my bag in the car!" she told herself. "And with all Mrs. Bragley's papers in it! If I should lose them now, after bringing them safely all this way——"

Action followed swift upon the thought, and she started through the grove in the direction she had come.

"Not so fast! Not so fast!" said a voice beside her, and the next moment a man darted out from the shelter of the trees and stepped directly in her path. He was, as Nan knew the minute she heard his voice, the tall, thin man with the straight line for a mouth, with whom she had had so many unpleasant meetings before. His face showed a desperate expression.

Nan did not scream, although much alarmed. She glanced over her shoulder with a half-formed

thought of escape, but the man sprang forward and laid a rough hand on her arm.

"None of that, my little lady," said the sneering voice. "You are not going to get away from us this time until we get what we want. Just a little document or two is all we want. Quick now—hand it over."

"I—I haven't any document!" gasped Nan, adding with a little flare of temper: "If you don't let go of my arm I—I'll scream."

"Oh, no, you won't! Slicker, that's your job."

Before Nan could move a soft, fat hand was pressed over her mouth from behind and she twisted about to find that her second captor was the short, fat man who had been the companion of her more dangerous enemy on the boat.

"Come, we're in a hurry," snapped the latter, and Nan's terrified eyes came back to his. "Will you give 'em to us or do we have to take them?"

Nan shook her head, and with a snort of impatience the man laid rough hands upon her and began to search her clothing for the papers. Then, finding nothing, he turned upon her in a towering rage.

"You're a sly one," he growled between his teeth. "But let me tell you this, you little imp——"

"Easy, Jensen, easy," cautioned the fat man, whose hand still covered Nan's mouth.

"If we don't find those papers within the next

forty-eight hours," raged the other, not noticing his companion, "you will be mighty sorry. Something is going to happen to you! Get me?"

"You—you brute!" gasped Nan, as the fat man removed his hand from her mouth.

"It won't do you any good to call names, Miss. You get those papers for us. And don't you dare to hand 'em to any of your friends either. If you do—well, you'll be sorry. We are out for those papers, and we are bound to have 'em."

He pushed Nan from him with such force that she stumbled and fell full length on the ground, where she lay, a bewildered heap of indignant girlhood.

For a moment the tall man looked at her with a cruel smile touching his thin mouth. Then he took his companion by the arm and disappeared through the trees.

He pushed Nan from him with such force that she stumbled and fell.

(*See page 216*)

CHAPTER XXVII

WALTER TO THE RESCUE

A FAMILIAR shout roused Nan, and she sat up, pushing the hair back from her face, and instinctively straightened her dress. She picked up her hat, which had fallen off when she fell, and she pushed this down over her soft hair as she stumbled to her feet.

She answered the familiar hail, and in another moment she saw Walter running toward her, looking very anxious and upset. But when the youth saw her face he stood still, staring at her stupidly.

"Why, Nan!" he cried, "what is it? You—why, you've been crying!"

"W-with rage," said Nan, a sob rising in her throat. "It's those men, Walter. They searched me! Oh, I'll never get over it—never!"

This time she broke down completely and Walter ran to her, putting a protecting arm about her, glancing about him at the same time as if he hoped to see the men who had frightened her and wreak vengeance then and there.

"Searched you! Who?" he demanded; then, be-

fore she could speak, he added as though answering his own question: "It was those men, Nan. You told me. Where are they? Quick! Which way did they go?"

But Nan only shook her head and clung to him a little as though she found comfort in his being there.

"You couldn't catch them—they have had too much of a start," she said. Then, with a shudder of remembrance, she drew herself from Walter's grasp and looked at him wildly. "Walter!" she cried. "There are all our bags in the auto—Mrs. Bragley's papers—and those—those—beasts around loose! Oh—oh——" Before she had finished she had started toward the road on a run with Walter in close pursuit.

They met the rest of the anxious party on the way, but nothing less than an earthquake could have stopped Nan then. She waved to them and Walter shouted something unintelligible as he raced past, and they had nothing else to do but to follow the young lunatics—for that is what they called them.

When Mr. and Mrs. Mason and the girls arrived at the spot where they had left their car they found Walter and Nan sitting on the running board and Nan holding something in her hand which she waved wildly at them.

"They're safe! They're safe!" she called, as

Rhoda, Grace and Bess ran up to her and then stopped short at the disheveled picture she made.

"Why, Nan Sherwood!" began Bess, amazed, "what——"

"Why, Nan, you've been crying!" exclaimed Rhoda, running forward and putting a protecting arm about her friend.

"You needn't remind me of it," said Nan with a hysterical little sob. "I may start again."

"But, Nan dear, something very dreadful must have happened to make you cry so," said Mrs. Mason gravely. "We have been worried about you."

Nan told them all about it, with little catches of her breath in between, while her listeners grew more and more agitated and Bess wanted to hire a dozen detectives immediately and give chase.

"So they gave you forty-eight hours, did they?" asked Mr. Mason, his mouth tightening in a grim line. "Well, I'll give them just twenty-four hours before they land in jail. Come on, let us get back to the town. I want to set some wheels in motion."

"But let us look for the rascals ourselves first," pleaded Walter. "They may not have run off as far as you think."

"Well, it won't do any harm to take a look around," said Mr. Mason.

He and his son went back into the orange grove and there spent the best part of half an hour trying

to get some trace of Nan's assailants. They found some footprints and followed these, but presently the marks were lost in crossing a brook.

Some men working in the far end of the orange grove came up and wanted to know what was the matter.

"You ought to get some bloodhounds on their trail," said one when they had told their story. "Nothing like them dogs to trail a man."

"We haven't any bloodhounds and we haven't any time to get them," replied Mr. Mason.

"We might offer a reward for their capture," suggested Walter.

"We'll do that—if the authorities cannot aid us," said his father.

"Those rascals ought to be hung, Dad."

"I wouldn't say hung, Walter. But they ought to be severely punished. I fear they have scared Nan so she will not enjoy her visit to Florida."

"You had better take those papers, Dad."

"I think so myself. I can't understand why Nan kept them."

"Oh, some of the other girls thought she'd be afraid to keep them, and she wanted to show them that she wasn't afraid. But now I guess she had better give them up."

The search was continued for a while longer and then father and son returned to the others. Then all set out for town.

The girls plied Nan with questions on the way back, but she was too worn out with her terrible experience to answer them. The reaction was upon her, and all she wanted to do was crawl off in a corner somewhere and think things out.

They found the only hotel in Sunny Slopes, and, under Mr. Mason's expert management, were soon comfortably installed in a suite of rooms on the second floor.

"You must rest a bit, Nan," said Mrs. Mason kindly. "If you don't you may get sick."

"Oh, I can't rest," declared the girl.

Nevertheless, Mrs. Mason made her lie down, and presently Nan dropped off into a troubled doze. In the meanwhile Mr. Mason, followed by Walter, had raced off to interview the authorities.

When Nan opened her eyes she found the other girls impatiently waiting to speak to her.

"Goodness! I thought you were going to sleep forever," said Bess, as she saw with relief that Nan's eyes were open. Rhoda, who had been moving around in the other room, came to the door and peeped in.

"And here we've been waiting all this time to tell you the news," said Grace plaintively.

"News! What news?" asked Nan, still heavy with sleep.

"Who do you suppose is here?" asked Bess, then went on eagerly without waiting for an answer.

"It's Linda, Nan. And she has Cora Courtney with her. We met them in the hall just now."

"I don't think Linda would have spoken to us, and I'm sure we weren't going to," Grace took up the story, "but Cora stopped, and so Linda really had to. I imagine they are none too friendly from the way they acted to each other."

"It's strange we haven't seen Cora but once before if she has been with Linda all the time," Bess added excitedly, for this new development had evidently quite driven Nan's trouble from her mind. "We've seen Linda innumerable times."

"Probably Linda has been making more of a lady's maid of Cora than usual," said Nan, putting a hand to her forehead, which was beginning to throb dully. "And lady's maids aren't very often seen with their mistresses, you know."

"But what I can't understand," said Rhoda thoughtfully from the doorway, "is why they didn't stay at Palm Beach. I should like to know what they are doing here."

"Following me, probably," said Nan, sitting up in bed with a wry little laugh. "People seem to be getting in the habit!"

Nan dressed a little while after that and went downstairs for dinner, although her head was still aching painfully.

The attack in the orange grove and the rascals' threat to Nan had now thoroughly aroused Mr.

Mason, and he had been out all afternoon while Nan slept, making inquiries and setting wheels in motion.

For the short time he had been at work on the case he had made really remarkable strides. He had found out first of all, through an attorney in Sunny Slopes, that Mrs. Bragley's papers were perfectly legal and that she owned a sixth interest in the orange grove, which was worth a little over thirty thousand dollars. This gave the widow five thousand dollars—a veritable fortune to the poor woman.

"I'll write to her to-night," Nan declared, even forgetting the ache in her head in her pleasure at the good news. "Mr. Mason, I think you are wonderful!"

"No, I'm not, my dear," Mr. Mason denied grimly. "If I had been I should have landed those rascals who attacked you and that crooked Pacomb who employed them in jail before to-night."

"Pacomb!" repeated Nan breathlessly, while the others looked interested. "Jacob Pacomb. Why, he's the man I told you about who sold the property to Mrs. Bragley."

"You said he was crooked, Dad," said Walter with interest. "How do you know?"

"I've made inquiries," said Mr. Mason significantly. "And I've found out that people out here don't think very much of Mr. Jacob Pacomb and his business methods. I haven't the slightest doubt

in the world," he added earnestly, "but what Pacomb has been behind all these attempts to get the papers from you, Nan."

"Can't you arrest him?" Grace asked breathlessly. "Of course you can!"

"I can as soon as I prove that he's a thief," her father answered.

Bess, Grace and Rhoda slept well that night, for they were tired out with excitement, but Nan scarcely closed her eyes. Again and again the incidents of the day came vividly back to her and she would start up nervously at the slightest sound.

When morning came she was white and big-eyed, and the girls were shocked when they saw her.

"For goodness' sake, Nan Sherwood," Bess scolded, all the time hovering anxiously over her, "I always said that that old woman's horrible papers would be the death of you, and from the way you look this morning I guess I'm a good prophet. Here we come to Florida for a good time, and look what we get!"

"You do look all worn out, honey," said Rhoda, putting an arm about her chum. "Come down on the porch for a little while in the sunshine. It will do you good."

"I'm all right," protested Nan. "I just have a little headache, that's all."

"And no wonder, after all those old papers have made you go through," grumbled Bess, as she fol-

lowed the girls out into the hall. "I'm only surprised that we are not all dead by this time."

"Now all that we need to make us completely happy," chuckled Nan, recovering a little of her old spirits, "is to meet dear Linda. She always has such a pleasant effect upon people."

"Oh, we'll meet her all right, don't worry," said Bess gloomily. "She always turns up when she is least wanted."

After breakfast, Walter, shocked and worried as were all the rest over Nan's appearance, suggested that he take her and the other girls, if they wanted to go, for a little ride in the automobile.

Bess refused on the ground that she had to write some letters, but the other three said they would go. Mr. Mason had taken charge of Mrs. Bragley's papers, so that there was that much less for Nan to worry about. She was thankful for this, as she rather listlessly climbed into the back seat with Grace and Rhoda.

"Let's go, Walter," she said, as she sank back luxuriously into her corner. "And I don't very much care if we never get back."

Meanwhile, Bess was having an adventure all by herself. She went up to her room after the girls left and dutifully wrote two letters, one to her father and one to her mother.

Then, having had enough of duty for the present, she yawned and stretched and wondered when

Walter and the girls were coming back—or whether they intended to stay all day.

Then an impish sprite of mischief whispered in her ear and her eyes danced merrily. On that chance meeting with Cora and Linda in the hall Cora had told her and Grace that they were staying in a suite of rooms on the third floor, and had asked them to come to see her and Linda.

And now, to while away the time till the girls' return, Bess proposed to take advantage of Cora's invitation and call upon her—and Linda.

She slipped along the hall, ran up the stairs to save waiting for the elevator, and finally found the door, the number of which Cora had given her some time before.

She heard voices raised in altercation within, and paused before knocking. Then she heard Nan's name spoken in Linda's unpleasant tones, and, quite unintentionally, she stood a moment playing eavesdropper.

"I tell you, she is a thief!" Linda was saying, in a voice that showed she was in one of her frequent rages. "Nan Sherwood has been acting funny ever since she came to Palm Beach, and that's why I've followed her here to see what she is up to."

"Well, I'll tell you one thing," Cora shot back, and Bess was curiously reminded of the turning worm. "I don't believe Nan Sherwood is any thief. I think she's a mighty nice girl. And every time I

think of the mean trick you played on her, and how you nearly wrecked the school as well——"

Bess drew in a sharp breath and immediately came to her senses. She knocked loudly on the door, but the raised voices of the girls within drowned the sound.

Linda had turned on Cora in a fury.

"You take that back," she shrilled. "If you dare tell anybody about my wrecking that steam plant——"

But Bess, unable to contain herself another moment, tried the knob, felt the door yield, and burst in upon the astonished girls.

"Oh!" she cried triumphantly, "I knew I couldn't be wrong! It was you, Linda, after all!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

CAUGHT

It was lucky for Bess that Linda's father happened in at that moment, for Linda, in her rage at thus being found out, looked as though she would like to tear her enemy limb from limb.

As for Cora, she gave one horrified look at Bess, burst into tears, and fled from the room.

Mr. Riggs, who was not at all the pompous, conceited man that the girls at Lakeview Hall had come to think him, looked after Cora for a moment in surprise, then turned smilingly back to the two girls and asked Linda to introduce him to her friend.

For one electric moment it looked as though Linda were about to refuse. Then what little common sense she had coming to her rescue, she sullenly did as she was bid and Mr. Riggs began to ask a few casual questions of Bess about how she liked Florida, if she had been there before, and other questions, which Bess answered mechanically. Her eyes were upon Linda as she stood at a window with her back to the room, her fingers beating a nervous tattoo on the windowsill.

At last Bess managed to break away and was starting toward the door when she was surprised to find that Linda was following her.

The girl stopped her at the door, and Bess thought she had never seen any one as subdued and beaten as Linda looked at that moment.

"Please, Bess," she begged, lowering her voice so that her father would not hear, "don't tell on me! No one at Lakeview Hall knows that I—I did that. And no one will unless you tell them. Please, Bess!"

"N-no, I won't tell," said Bess hesitantly. "It was a horrible thing for you to do, Linda, and Dr. Beulah ought to know. But I—I'm not a tattle-tale."

Then she fled down the hall, down the stairs, and into her room again.

She told the story to the girls and Walter that night, and they listened in amazement.

"Well!" said Grace. "And to think that Cora would be the one to give Linda away."

"I don't know about promising not to tell Doctor Beulah," said Nan thoughtfully. "It seems to me she ought to know——"

"Well, you tell her then," suggested Rhoda.

"Oh, I couldn't!" Nan flashed back indignantly, and Rhoda laughed at her.

"You see!" she said.

"Well," sighed Grace, "it's of no use to worry

about it now, anyway. We can't do a thing till we get back to Lakeview Hall."

When Mr. Mason came in that night they questioned him eagerly, but he had no real news to tell them. He had been able to prove nothing definite against Jacob Pacomb, and as yet had found no trace of the men who had so frightened Nan.

And Nan, away down in her heart, was still frightened, there could be no doubt of that. The man had threatened her, had given her forty-eight hours to turn over the papers, and more than twenty-four hours of that time had already passed! If they did not succeed in tracing the scoundrels and handing them over to justice in the next twenty-four hours, what might not happen!

Both Rhoda and Grace shared her uneasiness, and lazy Bess grumbled mightily at the loss of sleep consequent upon it. There is no doubt but what the girls would have rested a great deal easier that night had they known that a house detective, well paid for his services, kept watch outside Nan's door till dawn crept in at the windows.

"I wish both of the men were in Greenland," grumbled Bess.

"Yes, and without anything to eat or drink and freezing to death," added Rhoda.

"I can't understand why the authorities can't catch them," put in Grace. "They have a very good description of them."

"Maybe they have left Florida," said Nan.

"Oh, if only they have," cried Bess. "But I am afraid there is no such luck."

It was a weary-eyed quartette of girls that made its way down to the dining-room that morning, and breakfast was eaten in gloomy silence.

Walter eyed the girls with a mixture of humor and sympathy, and once he turned to his father with a grin.

"I say, Dad," he chuckled, "if something isn't done to-day about this business, I'm afraid the girls will be dead by night. They look half gone already."

After breakfast they wandered into the lobby of the hotel to see if there was any mail for them. Nan had not heard from Papa Sherwood or Momsey for almost a week, and she was beginning to feel neglected indeed. If only she could have them with her now, to advise and help her in this predicament!

"Here's a letter for you, Nan," Grace interrupted her rather unhappy thoughts. "And here's another, with a Lakeview postmark. Must be from one of the girls at school. One for you, too, Rhoda. Looks like Procrastination's handwriting."

Just then Bess made a funny little sound, half gasp and half exclamation, and they turned to her. Bess's face was white and her hand shook as she grasped Nan's arm.

"Look at those men!" she whispered, and though

it was only a whisper it went through Nan like a knife. "Over there—crossing the lobby! Nan! Oh, what are you doing? Don't, Nan, he may shoot you! Nan!"

But Nan was already running across the lobby, unmindful of staring eyes, all her fear turned to anger at these men who dared appear in public after the cowardly attack they had made upon her. She darted in front of them and blocked their way, her eyes blazing and her body tense.

The short, fat man started at sight of her and drew back. But black rage darkened his companion's face and he made a gesture as though to push Nan out of the way. He might have done it, too, and made his escape easily, for the curious people who had gathered in the lobby seemed paralyzed with amazement, had not Rhoda suddenly appeared at her chum's side, a little flame of white-hot indignation.

"Don't dare touch her!" she cried fiercely. "You've done enough—you—you——"

"Here, here, what's this?" asked an authoritative voice, and a big burly man, an assistant manager of the hotel, pushed his way through the gathering crowd.

"These girls are crazy," cried the tall man, turning furiously upon the newcomer, while his fat companion took out an immense silk handkerchief and nervously wiped his forehead. "If you don't

get them out of the way and lock them up, I'll sue your place——"

"Officer, arrest those men!"

Clear and startling, the voice rang out above the confusion, and the two men, without waiting to see who their new enemy was, made a dash for the open door, which was still only defended by Nan and Rhoda.

But the hotel man was quicker than they. He sprang before them and pushed them back into the crowd, which opened to admit them and closed around them again, making escape utterly impossible.

For a moment, Nan and Rhoda, left outside of the circle around the men, could see nothing of what happened. But presently Mr. Mason—it was he who, coming suddenly upon the scene in the lobby, had demanded the arrest of the men—pushed his way through the crowd and beckoned to Nan. She went with him, and Rhoda followed close behind. Grace and Bess had already pushed their way into the crowd.

The house detective, who had been in consultation with Mr. Mason when the thing happened, had taken the two men into custody. The tall, thin scoundrel, who had appeared in Nan's dreams for many restless nights, stood there sullenly, glowering around fiercely at the curious faces while his companion used his handkerchief more vehemently and

seemed to be growing more nervous with every minute that passed.

"Can you swear that these are the men who attacked you in an orange grove near here yesterday and demanded of you certain papers which were not in your possession?" the detective gravely asked of Nan.

"Yes, sir," answered the girl eagerly. Walter had slipped up beside her and was holding her hand in a comforting grip, but she did not know it.

"Can you also testify that they have attempted to obtain possession of these papers at various other occasions during the last two or three weeks?" the man went on, and this time Nan only nodded.

"Well," said the detective, turning grimly to his prisoners, while the crowd, not having the slightest idea what the commotion was about, but with a keen love of the dramatic, edged closer, "I reckon the little lady's testimony is sufficient to send you two up for quite a little vacation."

"Wait a minute, officer," whined the fat man, in spite of his companion's attempt to stop him. "You want Jacob Pacomb. He's the man who got us into this mess."

"So you've turned stool pigeon, too, as well as crook?" drawled the detective, while Nan and Mr. Mason exchanged a triumphant look. "Yes, I reckon we do want Jacob Pacomb, too. We've been wanting him for a long while. But since this is the

first chance we've had to get the goods on him, we won't waste any time doing it. Will one of you gentlemen call up the police station?"

Mr. Mason nodded, and the crowd opened to make way for him.

But at the mention of the police station, the fat man broke down completely and, evidently nursing some false hope that by telling all he knew he might get off easy himself, he babbled unceasingly until the police patrol drew up before the door. His companion stood off by himself, with apparently no interest whatever in the proceedings.

"Fine," said the detective, rising and patting the short man on the back as two policemen made their way into the lobby and saluted him. "Now you can tell the rest of your story to the judge. Will you come with us, sir?" he asked, turning to Mr. Mason as the policeman took the men in charge. "We may need your testimony to round up Jacob Pacomb."

Mr. Mason nodded, but paused for a moment on his way to the door to speak to Nan.

"Everything's fine," he said, beaming down upon her. "We'll get this Pacomb where we want him, and then your troubles—and Mrs. Bragley's—will be over, Nan. Tell you all about it when I get back."

Nan smiled back at him, and then as the crowd, its curiosity satisfied, began to disperse, she sank down into one of the comfortable chairs and looked

weakly up at her excited chums. Then for the first time she noticed Walter—and the fact that he was holding her hand.

"Where did you get it?" she asked.

"What?"

"My hand?"

Walter chuckled and answered slyly:

"I took it when you weren't looking."

She smiled at him weakly—but it was rather a satisfying smile.

CHAPTER XXIX

"WHEN THE SPIRIT MOVES"

"OH, I'M so excited," said Grace, looking from Walter to Nan. "Just think, Nan! Everything happened just like a story."

"Well, I must say," said Bess emphatically, "that for my part I'm glad it's over. I may be able to sleep to-night without expecting to be stabbed in the back."

"Goodness! they weren't after you," said Nan practically. "I was the—the——" she paused for a word and Walter obligingly supplied it.

"Goat?" he asked.

"Goat," she agreed with a smile.

"Oh, but you were wonderful, Nan," said Grace worshipfully. "I never would have had the courage to face those men the way you did."

"But if it hadn't been for Rhoda, they might have got away even then," said Nan generously, and Rhoda flushed with pleasure.

"I'm glad if I helped at all," the girl from Rose Ranch said modestly.

It was not till the girls were alone in their room

that they remembered the unopened morning mail. Nan had been holding her letters tight in her hand through all the excitement. They opened them without much interest, for even letters could hardly hope to compete with the excitement of this morning.

One of Nan's letters was from Momsey, and she put it away with a tender smile, for she always saved the best till the last. Then she opened the other letter, which was from Laura Polk, and immediately her indifference changed to interest.

In the letter, which Nan read aloud, Laura recounted excitedly to Nan how Dr. Prescott had found that Linda was responsible for the wrecking of the steam plant and that Linda's father would undoubtedly be asked to pay the bill for repairs.

"Does she say how they found out?" questioned Bess quickly.

"One of the servants saw Linda down there with some rope. She was taken sick and went home for a while, and did not know anything about the trouble at the school. But she is well now and ready to go back to her work, and in talking to Doctor Beulah the story came out."

"I'm mighty glad Doctor Beulah knows," said Bess. "I don't suppose any of us could have told on Linda, but she deserved to be found out—the horrid thing."

"I don't suppose Linda can help her disposition,"

said Grace mildly. "I heard mother say once that she was her own worst enemy."

"I suppose she is," said Rhoda skeptically. "But that doesn't make us like her any better!"

Then Nan put down Laura's letter and turned to Momsey's. It was a long, long letter, and she read it over twice.

"Dear Momsey!" she murmured to herself. "How much I will have to tell you when I see you again!"

A few hours later Mr. Mason came back with the news that Jacob Pacomb had been arrested for the crooked swindler that he was.

It seemed that at the time he had sold the property to Mrs. Bragley's husband, Pacomb had made five other grants, and, now that the property had proved more valuable than he had hoped for, he was trying underhand means to recover it.

The men who had made life miserable for Nan for the last few weeks and had almost wrecked Bess's temper and who were now gracing twin cells in prison, were simply agents of Pacomb's.

"So now everything is settled happily," Mr. Mason finished. "We can go back to Palm Beach whenever the spirit moves us."

The spirit did not move them for several days, however, for Sunny Slopes was a pretty place and the surrounding country beautiful. Also Nan had telegraphed the joyful news to Mrs. Bragley and,

since she had given the address of the hotel where they were staying, she was eager to receive a letter in answer from the widow before they went back to the Royal Poinciana.

"Although I do hope she writes soon," she had confided to Walter. "For I am really getting homesick for Palm Beach again."

The girls went to see Linda the day after Nan received Laura's letter, but found that she and Cora had left without leaving word of any kind for any of them.

"Poor Cora!" Bess said, as they made their way down to the street. "I guess she hasn't had any easy time of it since she let the cat out of the bag to me about Linda."

At last the expected letter came from Mrs. Bragley, and the girls gathered around Nan eagerly as she read it aloud. One had only to read the first line to tell that the old woman was overjoyed at her good fortune. The letter fairly overflowed with gratitude to Nan for what she had done.

"It has lifted a weight from my shoulders, my dear, such as you will never know," the letter finished. "At least I hope and pray that you may not. And if the time ever comes when you need help, don't be afraid to come to a lonely old woman, who will be proud and happy to pay back a little of the debt she owes you."

"That's worth every disagreeable thing we went through, isn't it, girls?" Nan asked, looking up at them with shining eyes. "Isn't it wonderful to be able to make somebody just a little bit happier because they have met you?"

"Maybe that's why we are all so happy," said Bess gaily, flinging her arms about her chum. "Because we have you, Nan Sherwood."

"Now with Nan's villains and Linda off our minds," drawled Rhoda, sinking lazily down into the depths of a big chair, "we ought to be able to enjoy ourselves."

"Will we!" cried Grace softly. "Just you watch us!"

The next morning they started back for Palm Beach. Walter asked Nan to ride with him, and she surprised herself as much as him by accepting the invitation.

She was feeling joyously carefree and venturesome this morning, and it was wonderful to be beside Walter in the car with the sweet wind rushing by and the country unfolding in tropical luxuriance at every turn.

"Oh, Walter, aren't you glad you're alive?" she asked of the youth at her side.

Walter's eyes were happy as he turned to her.

"You said it," he answered fervently.

Just then Bess, in the car ahead, looked back at them. Was it only Nan's imagination again or did

the look seem to say, more plainly than any words could have done:

"Nan Sherwood, what did I tell you?" .

But Nan just then did not care what Bess thought. She was very happy and that being so she meant to enjoy herself thoroughly during the remainder of her stay in Florida.

And now, with many good times still in store for them at Palm Beach, we will say good-bye to Nan Sherwood and her chums.

THE END

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